

The Art of Sorel Etrog and His Romanian Background

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- Abstract

The work of the late Romanian-Canadian sculptor Sorel Etrog is often discussed relative to how it relates to formal innovations made by more famous artists elsewhere in the world. This currently unfashionable approach does him a disservice in two ways: It devalues his work by making it seem no more than a provincial reflection of others, and it empties his work of any personal significance. This paper endeavors to place his work back into his original context and thus to restore some value to his reputation.

- Keywords

Sculpture, modernism, pogrom, existentialism, background

During the postmodern era of self-referential irony, artworks that seemed primarily to be formal experiments became unfashionable and out-moded. This led to a decline in the reputation of Sorel Etrog (1933–2014) from a high point in 1966, when he represented Canada at the Venice Biennale, to academic and curatorial disinterest in the early part of the twenty-first century. However, he never disappeared from the commercial market, and he enjoyed a retrospective exhibition at the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto in 2013. Despite this seeming approbation, very little advanced criticism paid much attention, largely because he was still associated with abstraction and formalism and not with meaningful personal experiences, reflections on the human condition, or current critical theory. It wasn't until his death in February of 2014 that a handful of journalistic articles and websites even acknowledged the artist's content. One of the latter, an obituary in *Canadian Art*, declared that a solo show in 2000 'seemed to gesture towards some of his Holocaust-survivor experiences' (*Canadian Modernist*, 2014), but that was it. There was no attempt to go beyond that observation to place his works into their larger historical and personal contexts.

This critical indifference is disappointing because Etrog himself believed that an artist's central concept is more important than the means used to express it. The clearer a *concept* is, he said, the more satisfactory will be the relationship between the concept and its formal vehicle (Belton, 1983: 115–136). Despite this, criticism of his work is almost entirely directed towards his artistic means, not his poetic ends. This paper argues that such approaches fail to note the influence of Etrog's diasporic experience, which he generalized into visual metaphors of the human condition in the post-war world. Like other twentieth-century artists with roots in small 'e', post-war expressionism and an existentialist attitude, Etrog transformed his own experiences so that viewers of all backgrounds could read them as expressions of life's crises and contradictions.

It is fair to say that different phases of Etrog's career saw him preoccupied by very different formal approaches. His early works fall within the orbit of eastern European geometrical abstraction. *String Quartet (Bartók)* (1955)¹ incorporates interpenetrating planes of colour reminiscent of late geometrical works by Wassily Kandinsky and Paul Klee, the latter of whom Etrog identified as his main inspiration of the period. In contrast, his works of his early years in New York reveal a growing interest in biomorphic abstraction informed by European predecessors and studies of non-western artifacts. Later works of his mature period reveal a more or less Surrealist approach in which human faces and figures are expressionistically transformed by the application of an entirely idiosyncratic motif - the 'link'. *Henry Moore* is a striking example (1974)². Still later works are very much more geometrical again, albeit with an entirely different motivation behind them. The austere simplicity of 1980's *Magic Box*³ could never justifiably be placed into the same stylistic category as the more exuberant *String Quartet (Bartók)*.

Stylistic taxonomy is a reflection of an impulse to categorize the history of modern art in terms of easily grasped pigeonholes, but the 'fit' of Etrog's works is never compelling. For instance, Etrog met the celebrated Jacques Lipchitz in 1959, leading earlier writers to identify how the latter's work influenced Etrog's style. A case in point is the latter's *Complexes of a Young Lady* (1960–62)⁴, which exhibits a clustering of forms that is not unlike some of Lipchitz's works (for example, *Prometheus Strangling the Vulture*, 1944–53)⁵. However, where the Lipchitz is blocky and horizontal, the Etrog is refined and elegantly arranged in a vertical crescendo. Indeed, Etrog's large-scale works are informed by an organic vitality and a sense of smooth, linear excitement that is foreign to Cubist and expressionist sculptures in general.

As often as not, Etrog was less inspired by modernist predecessors in the form of the great international sculptors than he was by non-western artifacts and, later, as we shall see, by painters, poets and cultural thinkers. For example, *Pregnant Woman* (1957)⁶ certainly recalls some of Henry Moore's abstracted organic silhouettes and swelling forms, but Etrog's inspiration came from African fertility figurines, not Moore's work. Similarly, Etrog's sculptures of the early 1960s - for example, *Sunbird II* (1960–62)⁷ - have been described as reflections of Lipchitz, but contemporary drawings very clearly show he was responding to Etruscan artifacts. In any case, Etrog's work is easily distinguishable from that of other members of the international community, indicating that he was a contributing member of that community rather than merely a late borrower of its motifs. Clearly, in order to fully understand the man and his work, we need to put him into his own context.

The artist was born Eserick Etrog in 1933 at Iași (Jassy), in the Moldavian plains of Romania, not far from the northeastern border. Although this was during the period now called Greater Romania, during which significant agricultural reforms would lead to swift economic growth, there was significant social unrest and political instability ('The Holocaust').

1 <http://www.ago.net/assets/images/555/2181.jpg>

2 <http://www.ago.net/assets/images/555/108583.jpg>

3 <http://www.ago.net/assets/images/555/119114.jpg>

4 https://c2.staticflickr.com/8/7020/6790534183_79821aed3b.jpg

5 <http://www.tfaoi.org/cm/1cm/1cm654.jpg>

6 http://www.miriamshiell.com/art.asp?Stock_id=6974

7 <http://www.artnet.com/artists/sorel-etrog/sunbird-ii-NKlpb3ZsGoyrj9cOylQR5A2>

Romania joined the Axis with Hungary and Slovakia in 1940, and Iași, being so close to the Soviet border, was seen as a centre of Jewish support for Bolshevism and anti-Romanian sentiment. During a brutal pogrom ordered by military dictator Ion Antonescu in 1941, the Nazis took the lives of more than thirteen thousand Romanian Jews in about eight days (29 June to 6 July), and they displaced many more. The pretext for this ethnic cleansing was the idea that Jews were placing lights in their chimneys to guide Soviet aircraft in attacking Romania. In May 1944, portions of Iași were destroyed during battles against the advancing Soviet Red Army, which eventually took the city in August. These events profoundly affected the boy, who spent these years partly in hiding, partly in flight. Despite war-crimes trials in 1946, things did not improve after the war. The Paris Peace Treaties of 1947 legitimized the Soviets' presence in Romania, and all Jewish organizations were outlawed in 1948. The only advantage was that Jews were allowed to emigrate to the new state of Israel in exchange for the latter's economic aid. The Etrog family made their escape in 1950, when they joined a resettlement camp at Rishon le Zion.

Instead of a formal education in these early years, Etrog's mother provided the best environment she could, taking him to the library, art lessons, and the occasional concert. He became a delivery boy for a medical supply house primarily to visit Tel-Aviv for its exhibitions and concerts. When he was twenty, Etrog began his compulsory period of military service. Although he was placed in the medical corps, his superiors were aware of his personal interests and arranged an army scholarship to the then-new Israeli Institute of Painting and Sculpture in Tel Aviv. He began attending evening classes, and the teacher that most inspired him was the internationally known Marcel Janco (Marcel Hermann Iancu, 1895–1984), an earlier displaced Romanian whose mother was also from Moldavia.

Janco had been one of the principal figures in the Zurich Dada movement from its inception at the Cabaret Voltaire in February 1916. He had created a sensation there with grotesque masks, but by the time Etrog met him Janco had moved through a potpourri of modern styles: Cubism, Futurism - even a kind of Abstract Expressionism (Mendelson, 1962: 92–120). His principle influence on Etrog was to open the younger man's eyes to the rapidly expanding horizons of modern art. Through his contact with Janco and lectures on the history of art at a Tel-Aviv museum, Etrog came to know the works of Paul Klee, Joan Miró, Pablo Picasso and Marc Chagall.

The young student's works of the time were all, generally speaking, painted wallreliefs in a style that could be described as a playful version of international geometrical abstraction. This playfulness seems to have been inspired in part by the fancifully organic biomorphism of works like Miró's *Hirondelle/Amour* (1933–34)⁸, especially in colour choices for areas defined by the progress of a wandering line crossing itself, a motif indebted to the works of Paul Klee, as can be seen in the latter's *Chosen Site* (1940)⁹. However, Etrog's works differ in that the lines are often determined by strips of wood organized like *cloisons*, as in *String Quartet* (Bartók).

Etrog's painted constructions illustrate more than these modernist borrowings, however. They are based on objects in the real world that had a particular, personal significance. *White Scaffolding* (1958)¹⁰, for instance, is ultimately derived from an earlier study of a petrol lamp (Heinrich, 1968: 24), which was itself derived from sketches in which he rearranged a lamp's parts until they approached abstraction. That lamp was something really in his possession in the resettlement camp of Rishon le Zion, where refugee conditions prevailed. Etrog had lived in a basement, reading and sketching by half-light (Ferry, 1965: 24). *White Scaffolding* inherits the lamp as a symbol of desperate times and converts it into international style geometrical abstraction.

Etrog began to participate in group exhibitions of young Israeli artists in 1956, and his works were occasionally reproduced in local reviews (Engel, 1958: n.p.). In the same year, the artist's studies of international art began in earnest, despite the temporary distraction of another term of military service during the Suez Crisis. His curiosity was satisfied for the duration by pictures in books, although Etrog later claimed that the real impact was seeing the works face-to-face, which finally happened in 1958. Etrog's student success had been so great that he held his first one-man exhibition in Tel-Aviv in late July and August, and he was granted a scholarship to study at the Brooklyn Museum Art School in America. The experience was a revelation. He was so excited and inspired by what could be seen there - particularly the African carvings and Etruscan antiquities - that he did not mind living in poverty in a cold-water flat.

Inspired by the creative freedom of the non-Western arts, Etrog began to explore sculpture in the round. The first batch of these new works primarily extended the principles of the painted constructions into three dimensions, but two other series broke into new territory. The first of these consisted of organic forms, inspired by pregnant African female figures, gradually leading to sweeping vertical abstractions based on human forms, as in *Pregnant Woman*. The second reveals a tighter relationship between form and personal metaphorical content, as in *Hasidic Head* (1959)¹¹. Here, the interpenetrating forms have an explicit symbolism. Etrog once described the long, narrow wedge seen in a contemporary sculpture, *War Remembrance* (1960–61)¹² as inspired by the memory of a bayonet blade piercing a dead soldier's cheek. In the *Hasidic Head* similar forms simultaneously help to create and to disrupt the features of a Hasid Jew preparing for prayer. The small, box-like form at the centre is not an eye; it is a phylactery - the small prayer box affixed to the forehead of the devout. (Etrog had begun to explore this theme even earlier in drawings.) *Hasidic Head* thus represents the Romanian Jewish community under siege.

Around this time, Etrog's fortunes began to change as the result of a chance encounter. In Rose Fried's New York Gallery, while he was trying to interest the uncommitted owner in showing his painted constructions, he met the Torontobased collector Samuel J. Zacks. On the spot, Zacks bought *White Scaffolding*, and he agreed to follow the artist to his modest studio in an unused fish shop. Etrog's desperate need led the collector to invite the young artist to visit the Zacks family home in Toronto. During that visit, Samuel and his wife Ayala offered Etrog a large woodworking shop in a plywood factory at Southhampton, Ontario, for the summer. As well as being a matter of financial and moral support, Etrog's relationship with the Zacks was also a major artistic influence.

Their impressive collection of modern works of art was his most immediate, intimate exposure to major art developments. Their holdings of non-Western artifacts reinforced his interest in African, Oceanic and Pre-Columbian carving, stimulating a renewed vigor in his studies at the Brooklyn Museum when he returned there in the autumn.

8 <http://www.moma.org/collection/works/80315>

9 <http://www.wikiart.org/en/paul-quee/chosen-site-1940>

10 <http://www.ago.net/assets/images/555/2183.jpg>

11 <https://www.mayberryfineart.com/artwork/AW26024>

12 http://www.justabovesunset.com/sitebuildercontent/sitebuilderpictures/ucla_s_war.jpg

Madonna (1963–66)¹³ features an almost complete bilateral symmetry, suggesting a new ease in the artist. This *Madonna* is not a conventional mother and child, however, for Etrog's contemporary variations of that theme display elaborate, twisting arms, much clearer references to anatomy and even, perhaps, spiritual nimbuses. This *Madonna* is entirely secular - even pagan in its evocation of a female form as the source of growth and of abundance. It seems likely that this is an oblique reference to his contemporary 'salvation' at the hands of Ayala Zacks. Certainly, the work has been read as a tribute to her (*Amaya*, 1971: 94) - and one casting of it is dedicated to her on the base. In any case, the calm frontality of the piece implies a direct, human engagement between the artist and his mother/muse.

Similar motifs appear in *Sunbird II*, which Etrog worked on from 1962–64, a period interrupted in 1963 by a visit to Italy to explore foundries and study Etruscan art (*Withrow*, 1967: 38). *Sunbird II* ambiguously contains elements of both destruction and sustenance. The wheel-like form at the bottom of the work can be seen as the disc of the sun or as a highly abstracted female pelvis (*Withrow*, 1967: 44). On the other hand, the cobra-like hood is like those on war-horses and mythical beasts depicted on Etrusco-Corinthian vases, where battle-horses charge and vultures hover over casualties of war. In one of the latter, a bird is shown diving onto a body from the disc of the sun. In juxtaposing such images of birth and death, Etrog meditated upon the conflict between sustenance and decay that underlies everyday existence.

During this period, as if to express his joy at having escaped Europe, Etrog began to produce a series of 'calligraphic', ribbon-like sculptures that spun up from slender bases to twist themselves into knots, folds and convolutions that spread a profoundly energetic line upwards and outwards. This spiraliform tendency acknowledges an internal, sculptural evolution from the figure in motion to a study of movement rather than anatomy. In *Ritual Dancer* (1962)¹⁴, for instance, an organic line spirals about the central axis of the figure, leading the eye around the work.

That these works were more than just formal experiments became clear when one of them was explicitly linked to his joy at becoming a Canadian citizen in 1966. A mammoth version of *Flight*¹⁵ was selected for display in front of the Canadian Pavilion at Expo '67 (a 'category one' world's fair) in Montreal. Like a horizontally extended variation on the *Ritual Dancer*, *Flight* leaps upwards and outwards with an abstracted gesture of ecstatic abandonment. Its two dancers' heads are linked together at the top, and the swinging limbs become a wide wingspan evocative of delight and relief at having finally 'landed' someplace, as if Etrog were finally free from the constraints and anxieties of his Romanian past. In this mature work, Etrog's personal context coincided brilliantly with his new nation's need to celebrate its own Centennial. In it, both expressed their exuberance in joyful movement.

The most expressive and succinct symbol that Etrog developed to signify the ambiguous duality of life and death, freedom and bondage was the 'link'. This motif first appeared in 1962 but only emerged with regularity after his trip to Italy. The link represents both a phase in Etrog's career (c. 1964–1970) and a key to his underlying attitudes. A link represents restraints but also a certain mobility or freedom to act within boundaries. We saw such a link in *Flight*, but a more existentially powerful application can be found in a work entitled *Dancer Twist* (1965)¹⁶ in which mutual inter-dependency is vividly rendered as a series of linkages within and across two bodies becoming one. 'I have always been concerned with duality in my work', wrote Etrog, 'two lines coming together - or the life of two forms interacting, like human beings - a duality of life' (*Etrog*, 1967: n.p.) As playwright Eugène Ionesco (one of his many influential and celebrated friends) put it, movement is a metaphor of life itself: 'a synthesis between liberty and discipline, or liberty and the law, expressed by forms at once bound together, yet unbound, in a dynamic equilibrium between dependence and independence, servitude and freedom' (*Ionesco*, 1970: n.p.). The notion of two becoming one also represents Etrog's Romanian background fusing with his new Canadian one.

Although 1967 represented a high point in Etrog's career, it was also the year in which he experienced a disastrous setback. He was involved in a serious car accident in Florence, breaking both feet and smashing a hand, provoking a series of aggressive studies of hands and feet and an enormous sculpture of a mangled hand in downtown Toronto (1972)¹⁷ (*Rosshandler*, 1971: 20–22). He became increasingly interested in absurdist, existential literature in the plays of Samuel Beckett, and even his portraits of close personal friends like Samuel Zacks¹⁸ began to take on a nightmarish quality, deploying links as symbols of internal stresses. To judge by the title of a contemporary work, *Survivors Are Not Heroes* (1967)¹⁸, he was clearly thinking of suffering and mortality at the time.

In 1968 Etrog was commissioned to create the Canadian film award known since 1980 as the Genie (Academy of Canadian Television, 2013). However, from about 1968–71 Etrog spent as much time painting and drawing as sculpting. A significant number of these works, exhibited at the Dunkelmann Gallery, were directly inspired by famous works of art of the past, ranging from the early nineteenth century neoclassicism of Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres to the mid-century modernism of Pablo Picasso. Etrog managed to translate these into idiosyncratic, existentially stressful works 20.

During this same period, Etrog was engaged in drafting several plays as a series of tableaux rather than conventional narratives. One of these pieces was re-titled *Hinges* in 1975, when media theorist Marshall McLuhan wrote an introduction for it. It deals with the cycle of life: first a solitary man goes about his daily routines while watching television. Later he is joined by a wife and child, each with their own televisions. Eventually the family goes to a cemetery, where the father climbs into a coffin, still with his television. In the second act, a man makes love at one moment and is a corpse at the next. The third act features a paratrooper who discovers himself trapped in a small circle of dirt in a minefield. Paradoxically, children play about him. A nearby tomato plant turns out to consist of wire. He uses some to repair a radio, but it receives without sending.

In this play Etrog summarized many of the different aspects of the human condition that had concerned him over the years. For example, it includes references to Jewish traditions - mourners wearing black socks, the compulsory clothing of the Jewish Shiva ritual, witness the lovemaking corpse segment in the second act. Images of alienation abound: each family member is glued to a television; the soldier can listen but not speak. Etrog juggled all the complex elements by sketching the sequences on paper in a filmmaker's storyboard format.

While these plays were never performed as such, Etrog used the same method in the making of a film entitled *Spiral*, portions of which were

13 <http://www.artnet.com/artists/sorel-etrog/the-madonna-e4LnBk6JcvukvVluCMzeqA2>
14 http://www.christies.com/lotfinderimages/d57927/sorel_etrog_ritual_dancer_d5792720h.jpg
15 <http://www.lareau-law.ca/Etrog.Sorel.jpg>
16 <http://tinyurl.com/zzzmulm>
17 http://www.dittwald.com/torontosculpture/gallery/full/Etrog_hand13.jpg
18 <http://www.ago.net/assets/images/555/99336.jpg>

published in book form (Etrog, 1986). It opens with two ambulances racing on a labyrinth of city streets. One ambulance contains a newborn in an incubator, the other an old man undergoing open-heart surgery. In another sequence, a voluptuous nude spreads her legs to reveal a large clock, but the clock does not signify a particular time. It is, rather, a sign of something perpetually *about* to happen, as in *Waiting for Godot*. In one of his poems Etrog called it 'recollecting things to come' (Etrog, 1981: n.p.). In another scene worms work their way through a mass of nuts and bolts. The imagery conjures a vision of the artist's continuing preoccupation with existentialist metaphors of birth/death, joy/sorrow, and muteness.

The film's mass of nuts and bolts was due to two chance events of 1971, which led Etrog to another radical visual change. The first was a purchase of hardware items (Trowell, 1973: 13-15), and the second was a game the artist played on an airplane, which involved doodling over items in a gift pamphlet (Amaya, 1972: 66-67). By the time he arrived at his Florence studio, he was totally absorbed by the possibilities of using nuts, bolts, and screw eyes as a new means of expressing the increasing mechanization of humanity. The results have been described as Etrog's answer to Pop Art, although they have a decidedly more classical aloofness and serenity (Mikotajuk, 1972: 68). At first glance, the interpenetrating shafts of *Samburu*¹⁹, whose open heads recall those in *Flight*, seem to lend themselves to a Freudian interpretation. However, the curve of the larger element recalls that in *Pregnant Woman*, implying that the sculpture is a highly stylized version of a *Madonna and Child* (particularly a *Hodegetria*, in which the child is held at the Virgin's side, projecting from her silhouette, as the second element does here). The title, by the way, alludes to the Samburu people of north-central Kenya, cementing our impression of the artist's continuing fascination with Africa. Arresting works like this enjoyed success as public art, but Etrog tired of them as quickly and abruptly as he began them, opting instead to seek new metaphorical possibilities in thematically related but visually different works based on hinges.

The transition from the bolt sculptures to the hinge sculptures of the mid-1970s is clear in *Steptease* (1976)²⁰, which has a screw-eye head and tubular components like *Samburu*. The striding position of the legs, however, derives from a contemporary interest in dance, but the general metaphorical tendency of the hinge works becomes increasingly a matter of 'movement' that can only open inwardly, as it were. Some earlier link works foreshadow this development, especially where there is only a single figure experiencing solely internal linkages. As the idea is gradually transformed into the hinge works, the idea of a hinge (which of course is made to move) is constrained by being placed in situations where its movement is checked by other elements. This motif has a particularly compelling expressive force in a monumental work entitled *Antiitête* after a literary work of 1933 by Tristan Tzara, a fellow Romanian avant-garde artist who had been closely associated with the absurdist Dada movement and with Etrog's mentor Marcel Janco in Zurich. Here, and in other monumental works like *Headoors* (1976)²¹, the hinges are illogical, presenting the possibility of movement but simultaneously denying it, unless we imagine the hinges moving only internally, towards the mind's eye. This appeal to the interiority of the human psyche is what caused critic James Purdie to allude to the infinite number of possibilities, extensions and choices that can be exploited if man 'will only cross the threshold from fear of his own tools to the chambers of possibility at the other side of human experience' (Purdie, 1976: 38).

As the 1980s advanced, the hinge alone could no longer restrain Etrog's urge to express the existential human condition, no matter what form it took. In 1982, for instance, he published *Dream Chamber*²², a poetic experiment in typography with one foot in Dada and the other in James Joyce (Etrog, 1982). Two years later he 'performed' a poem/painting/installation to celebrate the birthday of his friend and collaborator Samuel Beckett. *The Kite* consisted of wall-sized poems accompanied by stylized skeletal figures. In their published form (as *The Kite on Friday April the Thirteenth*), the poems reveal a preoccupation with monotony, routine and constraint, recalling the themes in *Spiral*:

at the intersection.
the same old intersection
womb, skull meet

And elsewhere:
the kite ready.
the same kite.
waiting. airborne.
the same. tower control
for undisclosed reason
for the same
undisclosed reason
prevents departure. (Etrog, 1984; n.p.)

The Kite poetically evokes life and death (womb and skull), while the prevented departure speaks of continuing existential frustration.

Despite a change in the 1990s to bright colour reminiscent of the early painted constructions, restraint and frustration remain central.

The biomorphic abstraction of earlier works is replaced by hard geometry, readymade artifacts and seemingly whimsical elements in works like *Composite No. 18* (1996–97)²³. Compression faucet handles protrude below a shuttered window, and spirals dance in the sky like the whorls in Vincent Van Gogh's *Starry Night*. However, we quickly realize that the window, revealing a celestial form behind, is shuttered and the view unattainable (Dault, 2000: n.p.). Even the sky is behind bars. Tower control, to reiterate the frustration of *The Kite*, 'prevents departure'.

The origins of Etrog's views can be traced to the difficult circumstances of his early life in Romania, while his introspective and philosophical inclinations reinforced his core message that life is essentially absurd. It was once observed that Etrog's contribution to Canadian modernism was a matter of introducing Constructivism (that is, geometric abstraction) to an unfamiliar public (Rosshandler, 1971: 43), but surely his contribution goes well beyond that. He introduced a note of internationalism into a still fairly parochial culture in the 1960s, and his philosophical bent expanded the narrow, nationalistic concerns of the Canadian Centennial era into speculations of the larger significance of being human. His position in art history simply cannot be assessed as the succession of the stylistic 'isms' in which he worked.

19 https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Survivors_Are_Not_Heroes_Sorel_Etrog.JPG

20 <http://www.ago.net/assets/images/555/99332a02.jpg>

21 <http://www.ago.net/assets/images/555/99330a01.jpg>

22 <http://tinyurl.com/jfb3k98>

23 <http://www.ago.net/assets/images/555/99334.jpg>

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