

A palette

(French *palette*, Italian *paletta* – a board) is an essential tool for a painter. It is a wooden board for mixing oil, tempera and other colours: ovoid ("Self-Portrait with a Palette" by Jonas Rustemas, LAM; "Self-Portrait" by Petras Kalpokas, 1935, LAM) or less frequently occurring rectangle ("Self-Portrait" by Vincent van Gogh, 1888; "Self-Portrait" (1938, LAM) and "Self-Portrait with a Palette" (1967, LAM) by Viktoras Vizgirda; "A Portrait of Painter Antanas Gudaitis" by Vladas Karatajus (1958, LAM). They vary in size. We see quite sizeable palettes in the early self-portraits of Vladas Eidukevičius (1920) and Viktoras Vizgirda (1938). A palette necessarily has a hole for the thumb; in rarer instances, a handle is fixed on it. While painting, a painter holds the palette with his left hand and the brush with his right hand. Sometimes a palette has holes for colours and a thinner. Palettes already existed as far back as in ancient Egypt but spread more widely in the Renaissance epoch.

In our times, one comes across china (for watercolour and gouache paints), metal, glass, plastic palettes, but they are used by representatives of applied arts and decorators rather than pure artists. In addition to the most popular portable palettes, non-portable ones are also used. These are thicker, with compartments for colours, sometimes with a small container for a thinner fixed on them. A palette is not only a tool in an artist's creative work but the popular symbol of all applied arts overall. In a figurative sense, a palette is a range of colours, their combinations, a system of colours typical of an individual artist, a certain region and epoch. Even the colours of canvases of the painting school of one or another region of Italy, for instance, Sienna, Florence, Toscana, Umbria, Venice were influenced by mineral pigments occurring in that specific region, their brightness and intensity. Previously, when paints were made and pigments were prepared by artists themselves, each artist's palette was his unique, unrepeatable trademark. Normally artists used three fundamental colours – red, yellow and blue, also white and black paints or seven colours of a chromatic range.



Petras Kalpokas.
"Self-Portrait", 1935



Viktoras Vizgirda.
"Self-Portrait", 1938

Every artist arranges colours and pigments on his palette in an order typical only of himself and the most appropriate for himself. This order is authentic, like a canvas painted by an artist himself. A glance cast at an artist's palette allows knowing his favourite colours, their amount, order of arrangement, and the colours preferred. This is what decides a painter's colouring, i.e. the combination of prevailing colours. Even without looking at the palette of Viktoras Vizgirda, art critics know that his palette was dominated by a mixture of three colours – blue, green and ochre. The painter is recognizable from peculiar mixtures of colours, which sound differently from painting to painting but help recognizing his manner at the same time. One can tell the palette of Antanas Gudaitis and other famous artists who have devised a peculiar painting system of their own. If a painter has an excellent eye for colour, it is said he is a great colourist, in other words, a master of colour. It shows in his palette. Therefore palettes, too, often acquire the status of a piece of art (after the artist's death): they are stored as eloquent witnesses to creative work, companions, are displayed at artists' memorial museums and go on exhibition as exhibits.



Vladas Karatajus.
"A Portrait of Painter Antanas Gudaitis", 1958

One can tell from the palette whether an artist has a liking to cool colouring (with the prevailing blue, green, violet paints) or warm (red, yellow, orange ones). In the first half of the 20th century, painting in Lithuania was characterized by a restrained range of colours and paints of natural origin; it was more recently only that manufactured paints appeared. The palette and, of course, the colouring of paintings changed too.

Apart from a palette, brushes add to the range of the painter's indispensable painting tools. A palette and a brush are like a shield and a sword. They are the weapons of a painter fighting a canvas. Sometimes the brush is held in a combatant manner, raised up with energy, tilted in a patent way; sometimes – gracefully, as it is due at a moment of respite. In the "Self-Portrait" of Petras Kalpokas (1935) we see a palette and a brush, similarly to the "Self-Portrait" of Paul Gauguin (1894, LAM). To achieve higher expressiveness of a self-portrait, an artist normally looks at us, the viewers. Then the palette seems to be the artist's work tool more important than the canvas, which we do not see but fancy.

In the early 20th century, after World War Two and during the post-war period in Lithuania, an artist was equalled to a painter. An artist can not only paint a painting, a watercolour painting, but also draw a book illustration or a poster, create a design for a national dress, a piece of furniture or an interior. Thus, the palette is not only the symbol of the painter, his creation, but of the artist's trade, artistic life overall as well. This is confirmed by Antanas Žmuidzinavičius, classical painter of Lithuanian landscape, who titled a book of memoirs of his "A Palette and Life" (Vilnius, 1961).



Algimantas Kuras.
"A Hand and a Palette (a Slap in the Face)", 1971

Posters and catalogue covers of the first Lithuanian art exhibitions (1907–1914), more specifically, of the fourth, fifth, seventh and eighth one, feature a palette. The palette is interpreted diversely. It is not only pressed to the artist's body but also replicates the sun disc: from the palette, as if from the sun disc, beams – brushes spread. Through it, one looks at the horizon. It is at the same time a flower garden – brushes unfold from it, like flowers. And that young dreamer, experiencing in a distant horizon a vision of the dawn of the statehood of Independent Lithuania in 1918, seems to be the creator of a new life, a new Lithuania, an artist. It seems he can draw a vista of that new, not only artistic life.

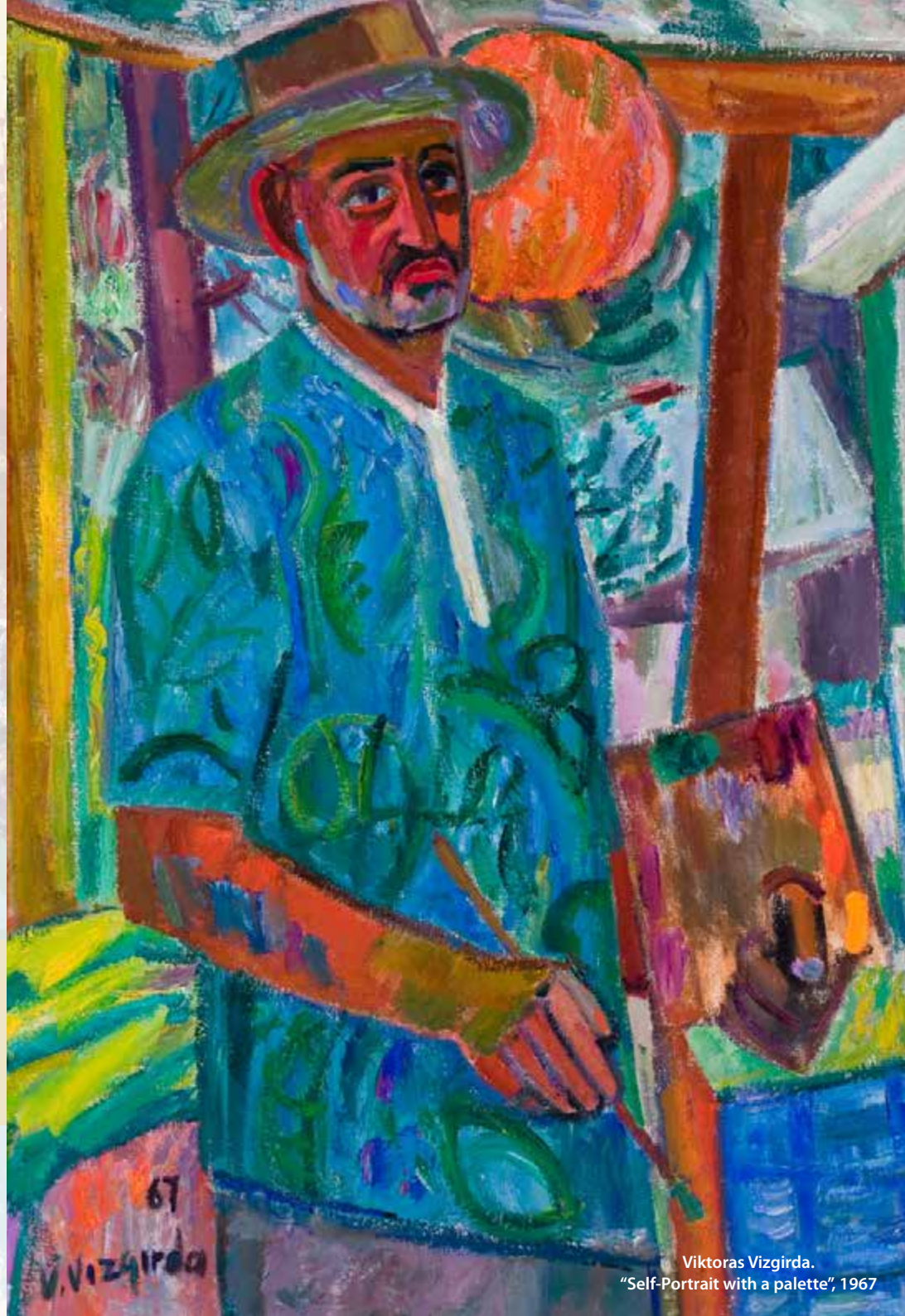
The palette, as an essential tool for an artist, is depicted with due respect and all seriousness, although there are exceptions in late 20th century painting. One creation is known, in which the palette is depicted mischievously, in an ambiguous situation. It is "A Hand and a Palette (a Slap in the Face)" by Algimantas Kuras (1971). In this canvas, the palette is depicted as giving a slap in the face. However, each of us can interpret it in our own way: perhaps one artist's palette is giving a slap in the face of another artist, or probably it is settling accounts with its master.

Today the word "palette" is also used in everyday life: while doing a repair, we often chose the colour for the walls we are going to get painted, the wallpapers, the kitchen furniture from a colour palette.

A studio of lovers of art "Paletė" has been functioning for years in Vilnius. It is run by painter Rimas Zigmantas Bičiūnas. The studio has recently commemorated its 40th anniversary and hosted a retrospective exhibition.

The gallery of western art includes a number of portraits of artists with palettes from different epochs and countries. "Self-Portrait with a Palette" by Edouard Manet (1887), the father of Impressionism, was recently on sale at Sotheby's. The French artist depicted himself not in working but gala dress. He is holding quite a long wooden brush (with red paint on the tip) which is for putting on an undercoat on a canvas. In 2010, the painting was sold to a private collector for 33.4 million dollars.

Ramutė Rachlevičiūtė



Viktoras Vizgirda.
"Self-Portrait with a palette", 1967

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