

**Fig.35.** Emilie Paličková Milde, Little Sun, lace doily, 1925.

Czechoslovak pavilions in 1925 and 1937 where some women were represented but their contributions were limited to crafts like lace making and weaving and only occasionally to other techniques. Emilie Paličková Milde, for example, successfully exhibited her lace in many international exhibitions for which she received various awards<sup>80</sup> [fig. 35]. Together with the work of other female artists, such as the ceramicist Helena Johnová, the painter Linka Procházková, or the sculptor Mary Duras, these examples were individual and isolated cases of female participation and came in tiny proportion to the representation of male artists and organizers.

### The odd one out

One of these male artists whose work was made prominent in 1937 was Zdeněk Pešánek shown in the national pavilion. His three works were located on the terrace and at least one of them deserves more attention because they demonstrate another aspect of possible artistic modernity that could be associated with

<sup>80</sup> Ludmila Kybalová, *Emilie Paličková* (Prague: Nakladatelství československých výtvarných umělců, 1962), 9.

the state. In the Czechoslovak pavilion, Pešánek's work was slightly detached from the rest of the national display in both form and concept, which were not easy to interpret. Yet the choice of his so-called light-kinetic sculptures which combined multiple media, movement, light and sound was rather appropriate in the context of the event and in Pešánek's own words captured "the best the main ideas of the 1937 World Exhibition."<sup>81</sup>

Pešánek was represented here by a sizeable fountain, a series of four sculptures representing 100 years of electricity and a light-kinetic advertisement entitled Radium. The fountain came out as the winner of an open competition of the Ministry of Education, while the four Electricity sculptures were commissioned by the Electric Company and first exhibited in the Museum of Decorative Arts in Prague the previous year. The installation Radium consisted of intersecting geometrical objects displaying two words: Jáchymov and Radium, located next to the fountain. The uranium mined near Jáchymov, in western Bohemia, was the source of radium, separated from uraninite by Marie Skłodowska Curie.<sup>82</sup> The use of radium in new treatments of cancer initiated the development of a local spa that Pešánek's sign promoted. Unfortunately, none of these works have survived as they were either broken in transport or lost; but they are known from models, photographs and descriptions. All three works were in the Tourism section of the national pavilion, yet as they were not part of the original interior design, their size and placement had to be adjusted and crammed into a limited space.

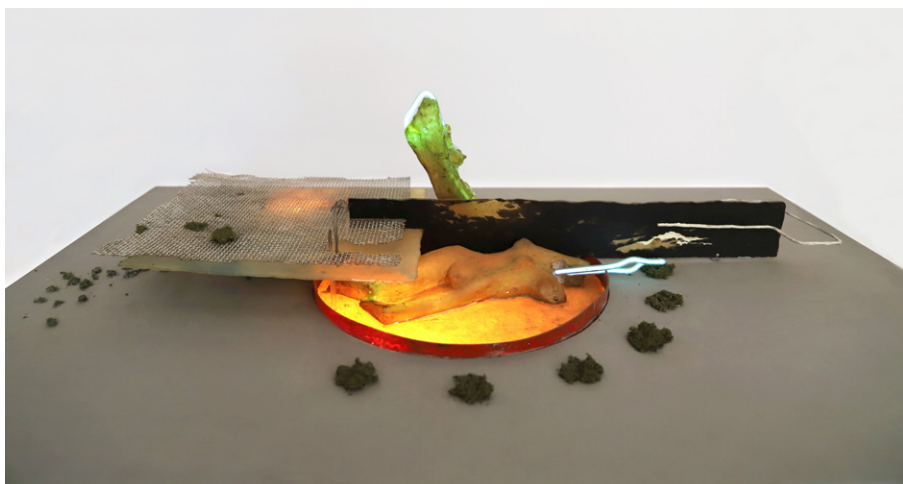
The Fountain, outstanding in its size, experimental execution and application of new materials, promoted the richness and healing effects of Czechoslovak spas and balneology<sup>83</sup> [fig. 36]. The competition instructions called for a glass sculpture to further showcase glassmaking in Czechoslovakia, already quite prominent throughout the pavilion. Yet Pešánek's work consisted less of glass and more of other materials, mostly synthetic resin, in which he frequently worked. Together with wires, neon tubes and bulbs, the use of translucent resin created colorful effects on the water of the round basin. In the center of the fountain were three human torsos, vertical male and female, and one horizontal female made of the plastic with neon tubes and bulbs pulsing light through them.<sup>84</sup> Pešánek wanted to include a mirror at the bottom of the basin, while jets on the rim would spray or jet stream water, with light reflected

81 Untitled document with inscriptions for the displays, AACE NTM, f. 136 Pešánek.

82 "Radium," *Tchecoslovaquie*, 129.

83 Jiří Zemánek, *Zdeněk Pešánek 1896–1965* (Prague: National Gallery – Gema Art, 1996), 176.

84 Zemánek, *Zdeněk Pešánek*, 178.



**Fig. 36.** Zdeněk Pešánek, Spa Fountain, 1936, author's model replica from 1959.

through this. For space limitations this was not executed.<sup>85</sup> The fountain, nevertheless, was supposed to be lit, featuring optical, kinetic and sound effects, similarly to the four Electricity sculptures.

Pešánek's fountain and the other sculptures, however, were received with mixed sentiments. The discrepancy between the artist's original idea and the actual execution had severe consequences for understanding or misunderstanding the work. Both the Electricity series and the Fountain suffered from technical faults. Power supply failed several times and defective engines had to be replaced which caused the fountain lights not working for several weeks.<sup>86</sup> The works were also very abstract and combined unusual materials and techniques and as such required extensive additional explanation of the content and artist's intention. And this was not ideal for the context of a quick consumption of information at a world's fair. According to one critic, the fountain came across as a "beginner's attempt with such limited artistic value that it had no right to appear in front of an international audience."<sup>87</sup> And as the painter Josef Čapek noted in relation to an earlier display of Pešánek's work in the Museum of Decorative Arts in Prague, the sculptures made of harsh, unusual materials, were not very flattering in the daylight when the light pulsing in the neon tubes was not visible.

<sup>85</sup> Zemánek, *Zdeněk Pešánek*, 178.

<sup>86</sup> Letter to the General commissioner's office of the Czechoslovak exposition from Pešánek, August 11, 1937, AACE NTM.

<sup>87</sup> Vojtěch Krch, "Československý pavilon v Paříži," *Architekt SIA. Měsíčník pro architekturu, stavbu měst, bytovou péči a umění* 36, no. 9 (1937): 143.

Despite criticisms like these which came especially from domestic sources, the Fountain and the Electricity set yet again received a golden medal at the exhibition for its innovative approach. The ambiguous attitude in Czechoslovakia towards Pešánek's work again shows the plurality in understanding modern art and design, its relation to historic art and applied arts and the future direction. Pešánek thought of the combination of electricity, light and movement as a new kind of artistic industry and new art, yet one with foundations in crafts and hands-on skills. He himself was a classically trained sculptor who had studied with Jan Štursa (whose sculptures often featured in Czechoslovak pavilions) at the Academy of Fine Arts and believed that being good at craft is the first step in an artist's career. That was why teachers taught sculptors how to work with bronze, stone, and ceramics, and students had to learn all the techniques in the workshops. That was why, in Pešánek's view, there was the need for not only schools of drawing and modelling but also for stone-sculpting, ceramic and metal working schools.

### Modernity across the ocean—Art in America

A crude trajectory, from Czechoslovakia represented in folk art, decorative applied arts to ultimately being associated with abstract modernism, could be established based on the Parisian exhibitions between 1920 and 1937. The search for representative modernism for display in the American world's fairs took place in parallel but in a less coordinated way. Here, local preferences and political circumstances played a role in constructing the exhibits as seemingly more conservative. In Philadelphia, for example, Švec's bronze sculpture of the "Motorcyclist," which had appeared in Paris in 1925, was left unboxed because the pavilion commissioner did not find it fitting the overall tone of the presentation. The assumption was that the taste in the United States is more conservative, and audiences would appreciate work of more academic nature. Not many large works were transported across the ocean for the high expense transportation incurred and the heavy "Motorcyclist" seems to be an exception. Many works of art were therefore outsourced locally or came from local collections. This applied to displays of fine arts too, where the work was often based on loans from American collectors, which created another picture of modern art.

This was the case at the Century of Progress exhibition, where the art exhibition was organized by the Art Institute of Chicago in both 1933 and 1934. In the first year, the focus was on American collecting and divided into three sec-