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Anna
Zemánková
The
Flowers
of
PASSION

By Terezie Zemánková

Translated from the Czech by Jan Travníček

The work of Czech artist Anna Zemánková is, paradoxically, better known in the United States than in her native Europe.¹ The work of some art brut artists tends not to change a lot over time. Yet Zemánková's work went through several evolutionary stages. If we want to understand what is hidden in the artist's amphibious flowers, in thousands of filaments gathered into independent organisms, or diamonds stuck into a rough clutter of artificial fibers, we need to know something about the creator's life and be able to understand her feelings.

UNTITLED
Anna
Zemánková
(1908-1986)
Prague, Czech
Republic
1962-1964
Pastel,
gouache, and
India ink on
paper
23½ × 33"
Collection of
the
Zemánková
family

Anna Zemánková (née Veselá) was born on August 23, 1908, the second of four children in a Catholic family in the small Moravian village of Staré Hodolany, in the Czech Republic near Olomouc, the sumptuous cultural center of the region. From childhood, she responded strongly to the aesthetics of her environment. Her mother, Adolfa, ruled strictly over the family, whereas her father, Antonin, a hairdresser and popular musician, brought a free, bohemian spirit into the household. Both of their influences contributed to the development of Anna's personality. She was also influenced by the social and political climate of her childhood, which was characterized by a strong patriotism that became even more powerful after the fall of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the birth of an independent Czechoslovakia in 1918. This patriotic revival included a passionate preservation of traditions, including processions in folk costumes, folk songs, and fairy tales, as well as classes in ornamental drawing influenced by folk art.

All of this was a natural part of the life of young Anna Veselá. She made her first attempts to paint during her adolescence. She based her realistic landscapes on postcards and showed a great sense for color. Even though she wished to study fine art, she never received any education of this kind. Her parents were strictly opposed to an artistic career for their daughter. She respected their wishes and studied to become a dentist instead. In 1931 she opened her own small practice, in Olomouc. Two years later she married Bohumír Zemánek, a lieutenant in the armed forces, and soon after that she set her work, and even her painting, aside, dedicating the next few decades of her life to her children. Maternity became for her a source of both happiness and deep desperation. Her firstborn, a son, died of cancer at the age of four, and the loss traumatized her for the rest of her life. She also had difficulty coping with several failed pregnancies.

The world of children was the place where Anna found sanctuary. With great talent as a fabulist, she made up fairy tales; created toys (she even installed a talking gadget into a plush stork); crocheted pillows (embedded with music boxes); tailored fancy clothes; and decorated her children's rooms. For her, the role of



ELECTRIC FRUIT
1967-1968
Pastel and ballpoint
ink on paper
36¼ x 27"
Collection of the
Zemánková family



UNTITLED
1963-1965
Pastel and oil on
paper
33 x 23½"
Collection of the
Zemánková family

mother made it possible to flee from the unjust world of adults—the world her romantic soul could not accept. Yet she demanded absolute submission and respect from her children. She was building a cult of the "Big Mother" in her family.²

In 1948 Bohumír Zemánek was promoted to major and sent to Prague. The whole family, which by now included three children, Slavomír, Bohumil, and Annynka, moved to a spacious apartment in a leafy and prestigious residential district of the capital city. This idyllic existence did not last for long, however. In the mid-1950s, Anna's dream world slowly started to break down. Her husband, an introverted and disciplined soldier, never had much of an understanding of the dramatic manifestations of his romantic wife. Their conflicts slowly developed into a major crisis, further worsened by

Anna's difficult menopause. Her frustrations were intensified by the fact that her growing children were drifting away from her and establishing independence. This all led to overwhelming feelings of disgruntlement, disillusionment, and sadness.

Although some theorists have speculated about Zemánková's psychiatric diagnosis, she did not have any. Her declining social and physiological role as a woman and mother, however, caused her great insecurity. Her problems lived on in her heart, and grew monstrous. In 1960, when she was fifty-two years old, her sons encouraged her to resume painting after they found a suitcase full of her youthful drawings in the cellar. Creating art allowed her to find a way out of her joyless mood. This became a channel that allowed her suppressed desires to come to the surface, liberating her. She started to draw flowers, which she had always loved. And

from the beginning her works contained fantastical elements.

Zemánková always started drawing at dawn, while her family was still asleep and before she had fully emerged from her dreams. In this state, she could be more spontaneous and allow her imagination to roam free. Excitedly, she would wait to see which image, coming from her dreams, impressions, and feelings of a previous day, would gather concrete forms: "It is like when a composer hears the first tone, for example a casserole falls on the ground, he hears the sound and catches its tone, which then carries on. It's like catching a key to something, and that is what I feel when I draw."³

She would return to the drawings later in the day when her husband and children were out, filling in details. Sometimes she spent up to eight hours a day at the drawing table.

ELECTRIC BLOSSOM
1964-1966
Gouache and India ink
on paper
23½ x 33"
Collection of the
Zemánková family



Generally sketched forms began to acquire more concrete details, which mostly resembled those of the floral world. They would grow, branch out, bloom, and bear fruit.

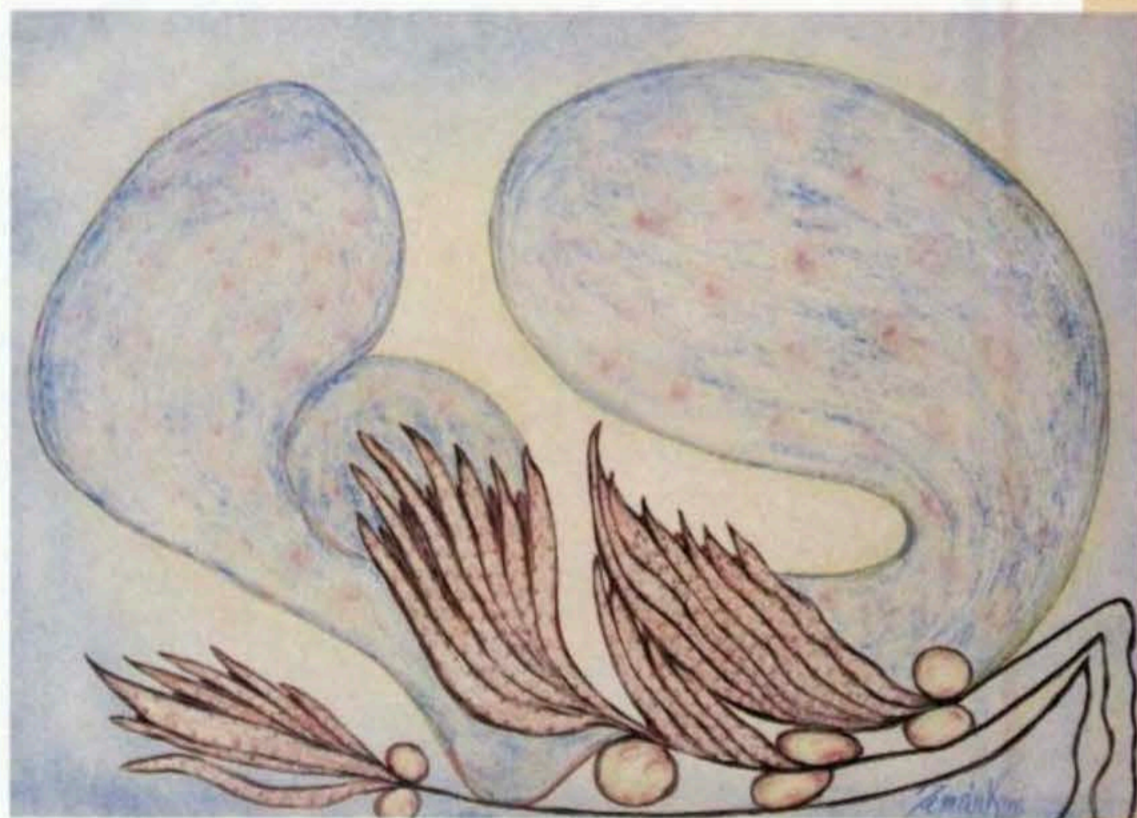
Initially, real flowers inspired Zemánková's early period. At the same time, she resuscitated basic elements of decorative ornaments of Moravian folk design (mostly fabric patterns and embroideries), art nouveau, art deco, and elements of Czech baroque.⁴ All these served only as holding points, however. Her vast imagination transferred the decorative elements into distinctive floral configurations. Soon the external reality was absorbed by her imaginative world.

the true feelings of the artist. Using the language of psychoanalysis, Zemánková needed to relive her trauma.

In the sense of French philosopher Gaston Bachelard's conception, Zemánková's imagination would be called "material."⁵ Her creative dreaming obeys the rules of symbolism and the poetics of matter. A personal cosmogony—the connecting of essential elements inspired by a theory of the origin of the universe—reoccurs in her creations.

In the world's mythology cosmogony is symbolized by a combination of four elements.⁶ The mixing of soil and water represents conception,

or acts of creation and conception. They evoke the moisture of sexuality. Aggressive masculine shapes penetrate fleshy volumes. They envelope, swallow, and expel one another. (There are several similarities to Georgia O'Keeffe's symbolic blossoms, which also use the language of the freed libido.) The miracle of conception and nativity and the ability to raise new beings from the deepness of the body remained highly mystical acts for the artist. "Rising from deepness"—the fragment of a poem by Czech symbolist poet Otokar Bøezina that Zemánková used for one of her pictures—could become the motto of her entire body of work.



UNTITLED
1964-1965
Pastel and ballpoint ink on paper
24½ x 34½"
Collection of the Zemánková family



COURTESY CALVIN MORRIS GALLERY, NEW YORK

She descended to the kingdom of her subconscious. Her suppressed desires and passions were the spawn of her creativity; but her feelings were never explicitly rendered. Her floral designs worked as a mask for real content. Zemánková attempted to endow her flowers with human qualities, experiences, and feelings. They are—especially in her early period—upholders of internal dramas. Many of them show aggressive arrangements of blossoms, which are contradictory to each other in shape and color. The contrast between a beautiful flower and its spitefully colored and deformed and repellent form recalls the eternal conflict of good and evil. It also reflects

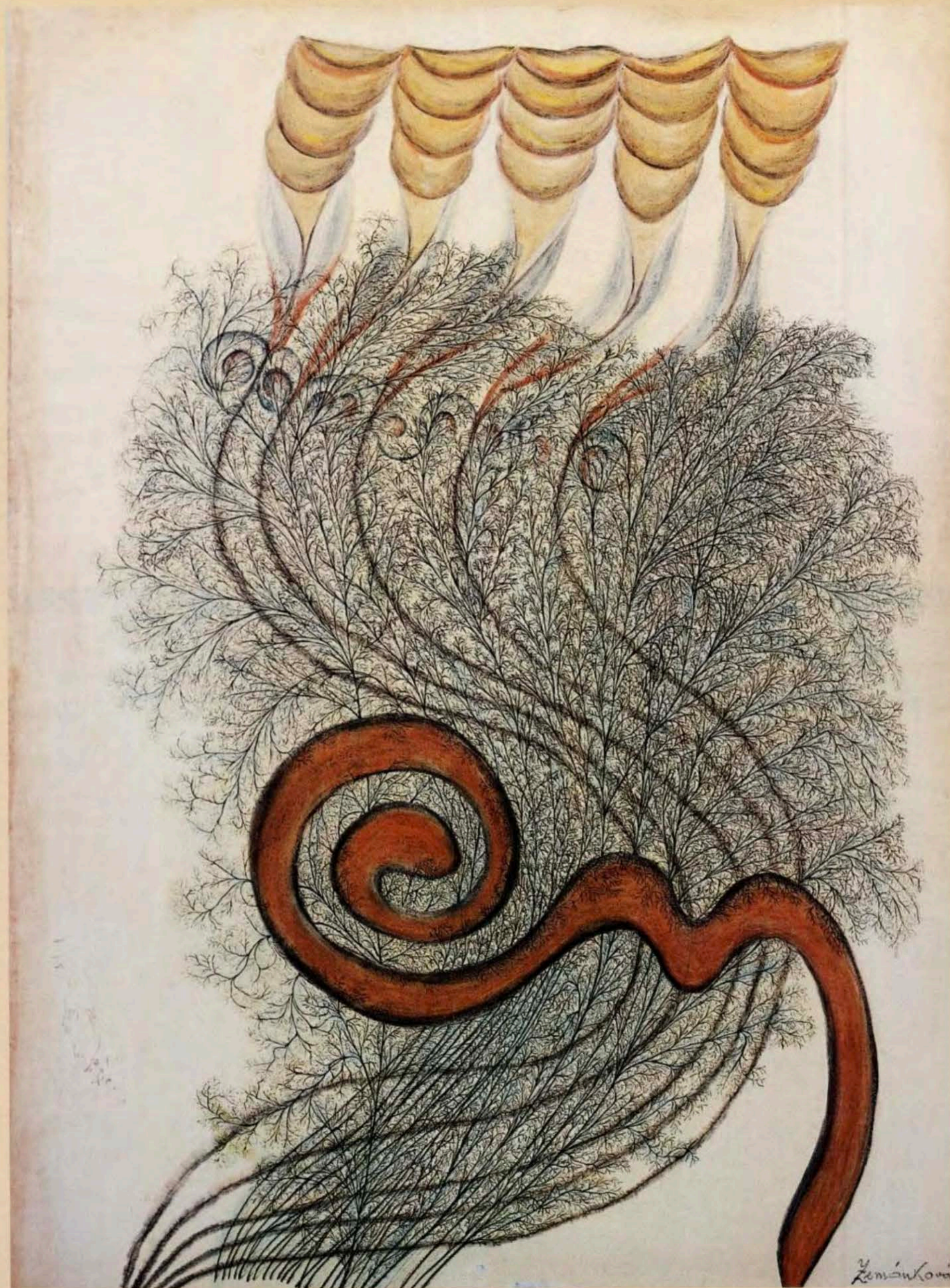
because the blending of solid material into liquid creates a new plastic, soft, and sensual matter.⁷ The *Materia Prima*, which is symbolically connected with the cult of Big Mother, is being born. This combination is particularly characteristic of Zemánková's early period. Her pictures show dynamic, boiling shapes that swell like dough. It seems to us they have a life of their own. We can see in her work heavy, nutrient, amniotic water. Pulp, juicy flowers are tumbling at the bottom of still waters. They are floating unchained, as a fetus in a mother's womb.⁸ Her images could be interpreted as a kind of intrauterine memory. They resemble the body's organs,

The desire to reach transcendence, liberate the spirit, and free it from the chaos of ordinary existence is obvious in much of the drawings. They indicate a tendency to drift upward toward light. Symbolic pictures of births combine organic shapes, resembling mucus and organs, with fragile details and gushes of rising light.

Sigmoids, spirals, and ovoid shapes that absorb, expel, and overgrow one another are the typical outcome of the automatic movements of her unblocked hand. Zemánková's "creative automatism" is one of the modes she had in common with drawing mediums, though she never took part in this spiritualist movement.⁹

UNTITLED
1960s
Oil pastel and mixed media on paper
34½ x 24½"
American Folk Art Museum, gift of Jacqueline Loewe Fowler, 2003.5.1

UNTITLED
1965
Pastel and India ink on paper
33½ x 24½"
Collection of the Zemánková family





As did the drawing mediums, Zemánková worked in some kind of creative trance, freed of intellectual/conscious actions. She used music as a device to help her remain in this state, listening to Bach, Beethoven, Janáček, and jazz musician Charles Lloyd, among others, from the moment her day began. With the help of tones, she interpreted the pictures in her mind. It is possible to say that Zemánková was setting her feelings to music:

Once, when I came back from a Bach concert, his *Great Mass*, I was so excited and touched by the music, I sat down at the table and began to paint. I painted for the whole week until I finished the painting. I hung it up on the wall and thought to myself: Good God, will there be anyone able to understand what I felt, what I wanted to express . . . ? After

some time we had a visitor coming around. This man was a well-known musician. He stopped in front of that picture. And then he told me: I can feel the organ and the singing. It was one of my nicest days.¹⁰

Zemánková's work shows principles similar to those of music. A central motif unwinds into narrow details, which often repeat and create altogether independent motifs. The automatic motion of her hand, which generated endless miniature details, was nourished by the music she listened to, as if she had been vibrating on its waves.¹¹ The artist had to feel electrified, as if she had been charged by an energy whose origin and activities were unknown in the normal world. Eventually she titled some drawings created through this method *Electric Blossom*.

The contrast of loosely sketched forms with diminutive details, creat-

ing vibrant tension, is very characteristic of Zemánková's work. In one period, obsessively repeated motifs, such as thousands of tiny dots or lines, flood the entire surface. Microcosmos became representative of macrocosmos.¹² Big, simply shaped leaves covered by tiny pistils, stigmas, and veins were transformed by the artist into a stylized visual language. It almost seems as if she were looking at her floral creations under a kaleidoscope, if not a microscope. The compositions resemble a section of cell tissue, the detail of a fly's eye, or an insect's wing. It appears that the artist penetrated into the inner structure of flowers and freed their hidden beauty.

Zemánková easily proceeded from drawing to manipulating the paper surface to further articulate her visions. She began to make indentations or pierce the paper, sometimes encircling the tiny holes with pencil. This method led to two new and essential factors in her work: luminous

UNTITLED
1965-1967
Pastel on paper
23½ × 33"
Collection of the
Zemánková family



UNTITLED
1962-1964
Gouache, pastel, and
India ink on paper
33 × 23½"
Collection of the
Zemánková family

UNTITLED
1970s
Mixed media and
embroidery thread
on paper
24¾ × 17¼"
Collection of the
Zemánková family



lampshades and very tactile mixed-media appliqué, using crocheting, embroidery, and collages of paper and fabrics, most often satin.

These new materials and techniques infused the artist with a new vigor. She started painting on plywood boards and discs found in her basement, and with these she constructed a double-sided screen divider for her home. The appliqués, embroideries, and satin collages—often embellished with beads, sequins, and glass gems—appear in her later work frequently.

In 1964 Zemánková organized a private exhibition, her first, in her apartment, calling it "The Open House Day." Two years later, her work was displayed in the foyer of Prague's Na Zábřahách theater. Her work subsequently appeared in several exhibitions of naïve and folk art. The definition of art brut, however, did not fit into the cultural politics of the communist government of the time.

The quality of Zemánková's life was drastically limited by obesity and serious diabetes toward the end of the 1970s. She could not leave her apartment and became dependent on her children. Only her creative activities fulfilled her days. Artmaking became an obsession, a necessity: "Creation

gives me a direction. I never felt like I feel these days. I used to be aggressive and unstable. Now, I'm calm, composed. I never get angry anymore . . . I have to draw a lot!"¹³

Even while living in a rest home, where she moved after her left leg had to be amputated in 1984, Zemánková continued working on miniature satin collages. It gave her great satisfaction to learn that her work was accepted into the Collection de l'art brut in Lausanne, Switzerland. She died on January 15, 1986. ★

Terezie Zemánková is the granddaughter of Anna Zemánková. She graduated from Charles University in Prague, where she studied the theory of culture. She is currently working on her thesis, on art brut, for both her home faculty and the Faculté des Sciences Humaines et Sociales at the Sorbonne, in Paris. She is the chair of the Prague office of the Paris-based association ABCD: Art Brut Connnaissance & Diffusion, which she cofounded in 2002. She is also the author of Anna Zemánková (Prague: ABCD, 2003).

Notes

- 1 Recently, all the phases of Zemánková's works were represented in "Vernacular Visionaries: International Outsider Art," at the Museum of International Folk Art, Santa Fe, N.Mex. (Oct. 31, 2003–Aug. 29, 2004). See Annie Carlano, "Five Vernacular Visionaries: International Outsider Art

in Context," *Folk Art* 28, no. 3 (fall 2003): 30–37, and Carlano, ed., *Vernacular Visionaries: International Outsider Art* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press in association with the Museum of International Folk Art, 2003).

- 2 See Terezie Zemánková, *Anna Zemánková* (Prague: ABCD, 2003), p. 10.
- 3 Anna Zemánková, interview by Pavel Konečný, 1980 (audio).
- 4 See Jo Farb Hernandez, "The Dawn Drawings of Anna Zemánková," *Raw Vision* 14 (spring 1996): 43: "It is tempting to suggest that these intriguing parallels might have been the result of an internalized communal design sense."
- 5 Gaston Bachelard, *L'eau et les rêves* (Paris: José Corti, 1942).
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Gilbert Durand, *Les structures anthropologiques de l'imaginaire* (Paris: Dunod, 1992), p. 261.
- 8 Zemánková, op. cit., p. 12.
- 9 Alena Nádvořníková, *L'art brut, umění v původním: surovém stavu* (art brut: raw art) (Prague: GHMP, 1998). Although spiritualism was an important cultural phenomenon in Bohemia and Moravia at the beginning of the twentieth century, it almost disappeared after the communist putsch in 1948.
- 10 Konečný interview, op. cit.
- 11 Jiri Vykoukal, *Paní Zemánková* (Cheb, Czech Republic: GVU, 1990), p. 7.
- 12 Arsen Pohribny, *Oinirické víze Anny Zemánkové* (Olomouc, Czech Republic: Muzeum Umění, 1998).
- 13 Konečný interview, op. cit.