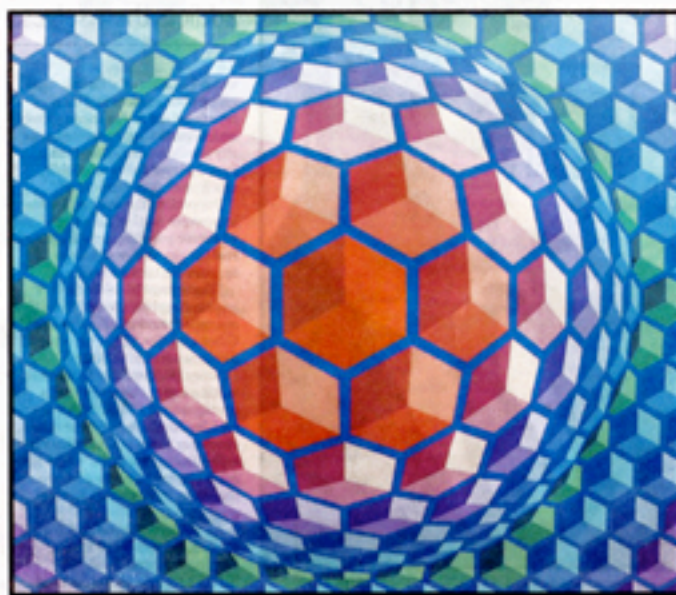


The small picture



Having a ball: one of Vasarely's pieces that will be on display in Donegal

Family feud fails to stop Donegal's Op art coup

PIONEERING Op artist Victor Vasarely (1906-1997) had a selfless, democratic vision that art could be affordable and accessible, and dedicated his life to creating a universal 'art for all'. What terrible irony, then, that since his death, his estate has been embroiled in legal disputes, family feuds, controversies and accusations of theft spreading all the way from France to Togo and, most recently, Chicago.

The latest twist in this long-running saga comes just as two landmark retrospective exhibitions of the Hungarian-born, French-based artist's work open in Donegal as part of the Earagail Arts Festival.

On 20 June last, the artist's daughter-in-law, Michèle Taburno-Vasarely (61), was arrested in Chicago on suspicion of stealing Vasarely artworks valued at more than \$500,000 from a storage facility. According to the AFP news agency, she claimed the paintings belonged to her and accused the gallery owner who was storing them of trying to steal them.

The gallery owner, Thomas Monahan, said he had been storing the works for her but became concerned about their provenance when he heard an inquiry was underway in France, where a court hearing is scheduled for 11 September

next. His lawyer advised him to hold onto the works until rightful ownership could be established.

After two nights in prison, Taburno-Vasarely was released on bail of \$125,000. She is due to appear in court again this Wednesday when prosecutors say they intend to seek a grand jury indictment on felony theft charges.

Taburno-Vasarely, the wife of Vasarely's son Jean-Pierre (who died in 2002), had previously been involved in a bitter family dispute over Vasarely's estate. When the artist died in 1997, it emerged that he had written two wills: one from 1991, in which he left his estate to his two sons, André and Jean-Pierre, and to Taburno-Vasarely; and a will from 1993, in which he stipulated that his grandson Pierre (son of Jean-Pierre and stepson of Taburno-Vasarely) should be the sole beneficiary of the estate and should also be entrusted with continuing the work of the Vasarely Foundation.

Several years of litigation ensued over which will was valid until finally, in 2005, the French court of appeal ruled in favour of Vasarely's grandson Pierre.

But the story didn't end there: the upcoming 11 September hearing is seeking to establish the whereabouts of some 1,300 artworks which allegedly disappeared from the Vasarely Foundation in Aix-en-Provence.

The once-flourishing foundation, established by Vasarely in 1971 to make his work accessible to the public, is currently under the control of a court-appointed administrator. Taburno-Vasarely served as its president from 1995 to 1997, and as vice-president until 2007. According to Pierre, the foundation will "collaborate with lawyers in America" to determine whether the works at the centre of the Chicago case

used to belong to the foundation. The foundation was in the past embroiled in another dramatic scandal. Its president from 1981 to 1993, Charles Debbasch, was convicted in 2005 of embezzlement of the foundation and theft of Vasarely artworks. He fled to Togo, where he was involved in a coup and now enjoys a senior government position.

Unfortunately, these controversies have overshadowed appreciation of Vasarely's artistic legacy. As a founder of Op art, he is one of the most significant artists of the second half of the 20th century, and his geometric, abstract works of mindbending illusionism were hugely popular and influential in the '60s and '70s. By the time he died, however, his work had fallen out of favour, considered by many to be outdated.

But now there's a resurgence of interest in his oeuvre and, in this context, the Donegal exhibitions are a major coup, particularly as there have been so few Vasarely shows in recent years - due in no small part to the legal disputes. The exhibitions are taking place with Pierre's assistance, and will travel to the Vasarely Foundation and to the Vasarely Museum in Pécs, Hungary.

The hope is that the exhibitions will draw attention away from the notorious *affaire Vasarely* and back to the work itself. "I am very keen on recovering the real position of the artist, which was in the field of art, and not just justice," says Pierre.

Eimear McKeith

'Victor Vasarely (1930-1955)' at the Glebe Gallery, Churchill, Co Donegal and 'Victor Vasarely (1956-1980)' at the Regional Cultural Centre, Letterkenny until 30 August
www.eaf.ie