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## TOWARDS AN ARTISTIC DICHOTOMY - OLD AND MODERN

*Abstract:* The text offers a brief review of the Serbian cultural clime and the crucial West-European artistic achievements at the turn of the centuries. It accentuates specific social conditioning of artistic life both on the local level and in highly developed European countries, resulting in a particular parallelism of creative currents. It points out that these facts should be borne in mind when evaluating the Serbian art of the period.

Whichever of the attempted definitions of art we may choose, the fact remains that it is a peculiar form of human self-expressiveness, a complex structure which is more or less related with the other strata of an over-all cultural and social system. Its forms and contents are various, and its function(s) always susceptible to reinterpretation, both within individual historic epochs, and by contemporary or subsequent theoreticians. Respective shares of individual investment and social conditioning have also been a delicate object of research. There is no doubt that the Serbian art of the 19th century is particularly conditioned by the social framework. It was the period of national revival when the "discontinuous" nature of cultural development was reestablishing its course starting, in a way, from the beginning. That is where the phenomenon of Serbia's "trotting behind" European art and culture, undoubtedly due to the past events that determined the nation's destiny, comes in. Having lost its state independence towards the middle of the 15th century, Serbia started turning into a dark corner of the Ottoman Empire. Therefore, the monuments of art from that centuries-long period are more of interest for the history of culture, being some sort of testimony to the nation's fundamental need to survive. The autonomy accomplished in 1830, as a first step towards state independence, made Serbia an important cultural and political

center. As early as the thirties a few institutions were established which meant the beginning of a more articulated cultural development: in 1834 the first issue of "Novine serbske" was printed, and in 1838 the Lycée was founded.<sup>1</sup> Miloš Obrenović himself gave impetus to the revival of arts - building, the first collection of paintings, study of antiquities. The fifth decade witnessed several decisive dates: in 1841 the Society of Serbian Learning was founded, and the first plays were performed; the battle for vernacular tongue was won even in the realm of poetry - the poems of B. Radičević, and Djuro Daničić's *War for the Serbian Language and Orthography* were published in 1847; in 1844 National Museum was founded, and Sterija is to be given credit for the first public appeals for preservation and study of the antiquities.<sup>2</sup> By the end of the forties the first graduates sent abroad on government's scholarship, started returning from foreign universities.

The gradual change in the domain of culture, that derived from the same revolutionary turbulence resulting in the 1804 Insurrection, was marked by romantic referring to the past. At first, the need to define national identity was satisfied by gathering material, but in the sixties culture experienced fresh élan: in 1864 the Serbian Learned Society was founded; in 1868 Vuk's orthography was introduced, and the National Theatre opened: in 1867 Serbia took part in Pan-Slavic Ethnographic Exhibition in Moscow. The work of Josif Pančić gave impetus to the development of natural sciences, and Ilarion Ruvarac laid down critical method in science. In the seventies there was a variety of ideas - from western liberalism, through somewhat anarchic ideas of Russian democracy, to socialist and positivist outlook, with romantic enthusiasm still vivid.

Briefly, in Serbia which gained its full independence only at the 1878 Berlin Congress, strivings of the spirit went far beyond the lack of resources. Serbian Royal Academy was founded in 1886 in the city that was to get its plumbing system and power station only six years later.

While Western Europe experienced an almost unhampered development of its cultures and traditions, Slavic peoples in the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries lived with the same problem: quest for the ways to express national identity. It should be pointed out, since that is the fact that was long to determine the artistic life in general. Thus, for example, Vuk's work was based upon Herderian understanding of popular literature and vernacular language as being expressions of the nation's spirit, and the same influence determined cultural climate in other Slavic countries. General European orientation towards the idea of the national, that resulted from national movements and the ascent of middle classes, was additionally enhanced in Serbia by particular historical conditions, and it was in Vuk's programme that it found its best formulation: vernacular tongue; popular poetry as a base for artistic literature; scientific analysis of national economy and culture; introduction of the nation with its particularities into modern European world.<sup>3</sup> The entire 19th century in Serbia, both in terms of culture and politics,

1 R. Samardžić, 1983, 468.

2 D. Medaković, 1981, 5.

3 D. Živković, 1970, 72.

was marked by the idea of national liberation and unification, no matter whether it was expressed in romantic referring to the splendour of the pre-Kosovo times, or in a pragmatic and positivist demand for a transformation of the society.

Serbian artists in Austria and Hungary had a century-long "advantage" over their colleagues in Serbia. Therefore, it was them who enabled a gradual adoption of western conceptions. It was as early as Karadjordje's times that Serbia made the first contacts with the painters from Vojvodina, and Miloš Obrenović asked (1823) Pavel Djurković to come down and portray the members of the ruling family. Oriental spirit of Balkan architecture and traditional patterns of painting, that lasted till the middle of the century, gradually made place for the artistic novelties that met the needs of a poorly developed middle class. Those needs were reduced to church painting and portraiture. The latter was to be a confirmation of the newly gained social position, either as a characterized, or an idealized, Biedermeyer image. It was only with Djura Jakšić that freer colouring, something of the Romantic drama, and the problem of light were introduced. Yet, due to the centuries-long efforts to preserve faith as the fundament of nation's being, religious painting remained the safest way to earn artistic living all through to the end of the century. The cult of national past, cultivated through myths and traditions, found its echo also in the thematic programme of Romanticism,<sup>4</sup> but those historical compositions "seemed to be borrowed from the innocent mis-en-scène of our Romantic theatre."<sup>5</sup> Vienna, the European capital where Serbian artists most often sought for education, remained provincial until the end of the 19th century. It was only with the Serbian Realists that Munich became more popular choice. Though, it is true, Piloty's colouristic theatralism reigned at its Academy from 1874, the year French Impressionists stepped on the scene. The last quarter of the 19th century witnessed the appearance of Djordje Krstić, and it was by no means accidental that he was payed great respect by younger artists. Not only that he introduced Realism into Serbian painting, but the second exhibition of paintings ever organized in Belgrade (1880) is also related with him, as well as an entire programme of cultural and visual education (1881) - from the request to teach after the models from nature, to the suggestion that the Department for history of arts, and art galleries should be opened. His icons for the Cathedral church in Niš provoked a long-termed polemic (1886), and it almost was a turning point in shaping of our art criticism and aesthetics. Essentially, it was a struggle for a new understanding of tradition and art, the struggle for new painting. Generation of artists who had represented Serbia with their monumental pictures and historical subject-matter at the Millenium Exhibition in Budapest (1896) and the Universal Exhibition in Paris (1900), was the one that introduced the problem of light, though within realistic conception of form. That luministic breakthrough was a step closer to Impressionism.

4 M. Jovanović, 1976.

5 D. Medaković 1981, 277.

The last quarter of the 19th century brought about a turning point in European art. "The embellished world" of academic artistic patterns, pretentiously protected by referring to the accomplishments of "eternal art", was an obstacle to one's free confrontation with the world and one's own Self. Academism asked no questions, it gave ready-made answers. Impressionism officially appeared in 1874, with no troubled thoughts. Its hedonistic iconography, revealing urban man's joy for meeting with nature again, still makes a part of the optimism of a prosperous middle class.

Though remaining within the data of nature, this artistic movement laid claim to individual experience (impression) of the world, thus opening the way for various poetics - Cézanne, Van Gogh, Gauguin, Seurat - which were not only to mark the end of a rounded-off artistic epoch, but also were a sign of the century to come.

The end of the 19th century comprised an almost metaphysical complexity of the *fin de siècle*. Rapid development of science, industrial breakthrough, birth of a technological civilization, offered contradictory prospects. On the one hand, self-confidence of man as a creator of such power, and on the other, confrontation with inability to control his own product. The scale of values gradually turned upside down. Instead of the unique, industry imposed a series. Accordingly, value of the individual was substituted for mass, where an individual was all but a unit in a line.

Polyvalence of such a situation is perhaps best expressed in a movement that spread throughout Europe, distinguished by a cosmopolitan trademark of Modernity. Though based upon same morphological and conceptual premisses, it assumed different forms and names in different countries: *Art Nouveau*, *Jugendstil*, *Sezessionstil*, *Modern Style*... It comprised both Morris's appeal for revival of crafts retreating in front of uniform industrial products, and the will to use new materials and technology; aspirations towards the new, towards the style, rejection of historicism, and anarchic resorting to the artistic past; symbolistic quest beyond the appearances, and a Biedermeier-like lull within a decorative domestic interieure; individualistic preoccupation with one's own inmost depths, and an aspiration towards national or supranational style, towards *Gesamtkunstwerk*... In spite of all its intentions, the formal lexics of this movement was rather limited, it actually kept traditional plastic language. It was not the picture conceived as a conveyor of literary symbols that could produce any change, but it was the (re)discovery of self-expressiveness of the basic pictorial means - colour, line, form. Maurice Denis's words (1890) testified to that: "Before it becomes a war horse, a nude woman, or some anecdote, picture is essentially a flat surface covered with colours arranged according to some order."<sup>6</sup> Finally, the entire course of art by the end of the 19th and in the beginning of the 20th centuries led towards the change of the very notion of art that used to be understood in terms of *mimesis*. Cézanne thinks that art is a harmony parallel to nature, Gauguin wants to move away from the illusion of an object and, comparing colouristic

6 W. Haftmann, 1965, 41-42.

harmonies with the musical ones, takes art for an abstraction; Seurat aspires towards art as harmony, Van Gogh tries not to paint things as they are, but the soul he feels within them... But the assertion of right to independent existence did not mean *l'art-pour-l'art* self-sufficiency. On the contrary, having achieved its ontological independence, art became means of knowledge of the reality and of what was behind it, an aesthetical answer to ethical and philosophical questions of human existence.

Change of dynasties in Serbia in 1903 opened the way to democracy and parliamentarism. The first Yugoslav Artistic Exhibition (1904) was not only the first accomplishment of the idea of Yugoslav cooperation, but also, the first "among modernly organized and monumentally conceived exhibitions in Balkan countries."<sup>7</sup> Dominant line in the then exhibited works of Serbian artists was best defined by Bogdan Popović: "(...) it is our habit to borrow from our history the subject-matter to be artistically treated. Heroic popular poems, our old and recent history, fiddle-man and fiddle, keep being subjects of our artists' works: our art is 'patriotic'.<sup>8</sup> It was the same orientation (and the same works) that had represented Serbia at the 1900 Universal Exhibition: "patriotic art" based upon historical subject-matter, and expressed in the language of academic realism and *plein-airism*, i.e. of the conception that L. Trifunović defined as light in service of the object.<sup>9</sup>

Certain level of organization was introduced into artistic life. Foundation of artistic associations testifies to that. An association of South-Slavic nature was founded, organized upon federal principles: "Lada". As it assembled traditionally oriented, and socially recognized artists, a "secession" occurred. It was the Serbian Artistic Association (1907), lacking particular artistic programme. But, it was the setting up of the so-called Yugoslav Colony<sup>10</sup> that was of major importance for the emancipation of our painting. It included younger artists who gathered around Nadežda Petrović. In 1905 they all went to Sićevo in order that "in the free air, water, natural green, stone, types, an artist could be close to nature alone".<sup>11</sup> Besides an aspiration towards contemporary plastic conceptions, it was also the idea of "integral Yugoslavism" that united them, as well as the effort to "introduce the cult of beauty into the education of common people."<sup>12</sup> Their cooperation resulted in an exhibition in 1907, to which Matoš dedicated these words: "These are souls thirsty for 'the new', for those new thoughts and feelings without which no progress could be imagined. Only new people have new sensations."<sup>13</sup> From our actual perspective, it is clear that, despite a variety of plastic solutions, it was for the first time that young artists stepped forward expressing a conscious need to go beyond dominant taste, and to relate our art with Europe.

7 L. Trifunović, 1973, 450.

8 B. Popović, 1904, 539.

9 L. Trifunović, 1973, 34.

10 K. Ambrozić, 1958.

11 D. Tošić, 1974, 382-383

12 *Ibid.*, 383.

13 A. G. Matoš, 1973, 28.

In the meantime, European art experienced logical consequences of post-Impressionism. Van Gogh, Gauguin, Cézanne and Seurat were payed due respect by large retrospective exhibitions (Van Gogh's in 1901 - Galery of Bernheim Jeune's, Gauguin's in 1903, and Cézanne's in 1907 - Salon d'Automne). The "Fauves" appeared in 1905. Accord of one's own "feeling for life with the way to express that feeling"<sup>14</sup> was a fresh confirmation of one's right to watch the world from his inner point of view. They were inspired by Gauguin's enthousiasm for primitive cultures as the origin of mankind's childhood, and Van Gogh's troubled experience of the world's soul transposed through intense colour. Between Rouault's dark world of Christian martyrs, and Duffy's fluttering view of the sea, there were Matisse's spaces of pure colour and balance, of the art as the "*calmant cérébral*."<sup>15</sup> Munk's screaming feeling of solitude and anxiety, Ensor's masks, were an introduction into the Expressionistic, "blood"-made picture. *Der Brücke* (1905) represented awareness of a disturbing abyss separating purity of the "pre-essence" from the darkness hidden behind the lights of a metropolis. Their response was intense colour, black line, distorted form.

In the first decade of the century, faith in stability of the perceptible world was additionally shaken by some scientific discoveries: splitting of the atom, and the hypothesis of space-time continuum undermined the established concepts. Matter was replaced by energy, and the static Renaissance point of view disappeared in the dynamic unity of space and time. Knowledge of the atom being split, Kandinsky experienced it "as though the end of the world had set in. In one moment the mighty pillars of science lay in ruins before me. All things became transparent, without power or certainty."<sup>16</sup> In 1910 he wrote a book *On Spiritual in Art* (published in 1912), formulating the concept of inner necessity as the basic aesthetical, ethical and axiological law. His first abstract watercolours were done the same year. To keep a distance from *mimesis* did no more mean to betray truth. On the contrary, it was a way to penetrate it more profoundly.

While the art of painting was increasingly becoming conscious of the specific qualities of its language, and practically was on the threshold of changing the established plastic pattern, sculpture mostly remained within the 19th-century limits. Anthropocentric morphological model kept relying upon Classical heritage. Either idealized, or naturalistic, human body has served for centuries as a conveyor of various ideas - religious, profane, didactic, patriotic. In the 19th century, various approaches to the volume and its situation in space were generally kept within lifeless academic model. Middle class did enable some sort of democratization of sculpture insofar as the possession or commissioning of sculptures, from portraits to monuments, was held to be a visible proof of their social status. But the demands sculpture was to meet necessarily stopped it from renouncing mimetic method. It even happened that the "development of industry easily satisfied all those tastes,

14 H. Matisse. in: V. Hes, 1978, 37.

15 W. Haftmann, 1965, 76.

16 Ibid., 139.

and cheap metal or plaster casts for home use spread around in an unprecedented amount."<sup>17</sup> Almost exclusively dependent upon the taste and requests of its commissioners, sculpture of the period was reduced to tendentious motif. It was with the appearance of August Rodin that the sense of sculptural values was reestablished. His own goal was to recover "stylistic integrity (of sculpture) that was lost after Michaelangelo's death in 1564."<sup>18</sup> Primitive or ancient sculpture served as a catalyst - it helped shape the idea of immanent qualities of pure form. In Serbia, there was practically no tradition of sculpture as it was alien to the conceptions of the Orthodox Church. Thus, a true life of this plastic art begins only in the 20th century.

This brief review of the points of "modernity" in the domain of plastic arts in Western Europe at the turn of the centuries, and a little wider introduction into the Serbian situation have not been presented here in order to sought for the things already found. Its intention was to remind of a sort of dualism which must be borne in mind when studying the period. One of its aspects pertains to parallel existence of two streams of creativity, usually defined as vanguard and conservative, and present within every individual artistic milieu. Another is local, and originates from the process of the "Europeanization" of the Serbian society. It is revealed in its effort to get its step with the world it truly belonged to. The first phenomenon is a consequence of all-pervading changes brought about with the Industrial Revolution. Industrial production induced a separation between work and its human purpose, between art and cognition. In a world that counted figures until only figures counted (L. Mumford), social role of the artist was becoming increasingly blurred. Art found itself at the margins of society, unable to intervene into the shaping of social environment. It is best reflected in the birth of a new myth - the myth of "*peintre maudit*", as well as in the fact that almost every vanguard movement envisaged its artistic image as an essentially utopian project of the over-all social space. Such dichotomy of the European scene must be taken into account in the interpretation of the Serbian art of the period and the evaluation of the level to which it succeeded to regain its integrity. Namely, official representation of a nation and its state at the international level (universal exhibitions aimed to promote progress of art and technique being the best possible example) virtually always implied an institutionalized manifestation of State power which, in turn, relies upon non-subversive cultural stereotypes. These are identified as widely accepted, inviolable values. None of the countries, of which we speak today in terms of originating avant-gard conceptions, made an exception. At the 1911 Universal Exposition in Rome, e.g., France built a pavilion, "according to the plans of architect Eustache, with the façade overloaded with ornaments which are mere reproduction of those from the 18th-century wing of the Louvre."<sup>19</sup> In its interior - Impressionism was dominant. Perhaps it was "modern" for the Serbian contemporaries, but it certainly was "old" compared with simultane-

17 Text of Footnote

18 H. Read, 1966. 12.

19 "Obzor" no. 154 & 167. Zagreb.



ous achievements of Mondrian, Kandinsky, Larionov... Such dualism was an element of the Serbian intellectual climate, too, where theory and practice, ethics and aesthetics, often were inextricably interwoven. Dimitrije Mitrović was not the only one who explicitly pleaded for artistic individualism: "The artist... may present things as they appear to him in any moment, and he may present them in whatever manner he chooses."<sup>20</sup> But, he himself was not able to draw a demarcation line between his political engagement and the interpretation of art. The philosophy of individualism could not fight against the "general will" of a patriarchal society and its inherent collectivism. Perhaps it was in Nadežda Petrović's work and life that these two opposites found their best reconciliation. It is true, though, that such a conclusion can be drawn only in retrospective. Her contribution was the contribution to the future. She was both a tireless educator of her people, a passionate lover of freedom, nature and man, and a curious creative spirit watching the world with her eyes wide open: "True art has thrown away the silky social ties and, being the most subtle product of artist's soul, mind and heart, it has begun to develop freely, beyond conventions..."<sup>21</sup> Her painting was a result of a spontaneously developed creative consciousness which coincided with the spirit of the period, and her belonging to her people and art was of existential nature. That is why she was able to develop a far-sighted understanding of freedom: "Reformers always look over the people and mountains, they look into the centuries ahead, having as their foundations the centuries left behind..."<sup>22</sup>

## ПРИЛОГ ПРОУЧАВАЊУ ЈЕДНЕ УМЕТНИЧКЕ ДИХОТОМИЈЕ - СТАРО И МОДЕРНО

### Резиме

Текст даје преглед културно-историјске климе у Србији од времена успостављања аутономије до рађања модернизма, као и скицу аванградних кретања у западноевропској уметности на прелому векова. Тражећи узроке феномена "каскања" српске уметности за европским дoметима, указује на постојање паралелних уметничких живота - официјелно прихваћених и друштвено потпомогнутих образаца стварања и оних непризнатих, у којима се крије клица будућих догађаја. При том, указује на чињеницу да је тај паралелизам својствен свим, па и културно најразвијенијим срединама, те да се то мора имати у виду приликом вредновања српског модернизма.

20 D. Mitrović, 1911, 10-11.

21 N. Petrović, 1912, 238.

22 N. Petrović, 1912, 237-238.

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The first part of the book deals with the general situation in the Balkans, and the second part with the specific situation in Yugoslavia. The author discusses the political, economic, and social changes that have taken place in the region since the end of the Second World War. He also analyzes the role of the major powers in the Balkans and the impact of the Cold War on the region. The book is a valuable contribution to the study of Balkan history and politics.