

Secesija or Art Nouveau in Croatia *Specifics of Art Nouveau in Croatia*



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Rudolf Lubinsky
National
and University Library
Zagreb, 1911 - 1913

In the nineteenth century Croatia was quickly catching up with the rest of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. This began with the Illyrian Revival movement that shaped new, modern, national self-awareness, and led to the considerable economic growth and industrialization of the middle and second half of the century. The middle class and intellectual class developed rapidly, and this had a strong social impact. It was inevitable that the nineteenth-century national and economic integration should affect the arts. By the end of the century the time of patriotic songs and poetry of romantic realism, of attempts to create an art for Croatia by copying old and foreign models, had ended forever.

Any cultural and critical consideration of Secession in Croatia must take 1891 as the starting date. Until then Historicism had been all-pervasive but in that year a radical change began in style and taste. 1891-1897 was a tran-

sition period during which groups of enthusiasts came into being but there was not yet any institutionalized form.

Historically the term Secesija began to be used in 1897 when the Vienna Secession happened, and the Zagreb *Društvo hrvatskih umjetnika* (*Society of Croatian Artists*) broke off from the *Društvo umjetnosti* (*Art Society*) just a couple of months later. This provided the historical basis for the concept of Secession and was particularly important for Austria and Croatia. We mention this because today there is a general tendency to consider the name *Secession* as generic. In that sense the term Secession should be primarily used as a conventional category for fine art in Central Europe

Writer Ivo Pilar formulated secessionist aims and realization in his study of modern art which he published as a booklet *Secesija* (first to be published under that name in Europe in

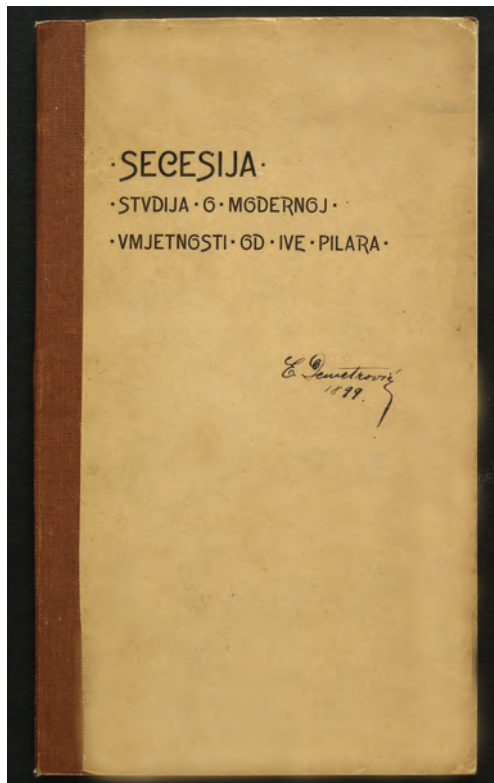


What actually took place at the Croatian Salon was liberation of artistic individuality and interpretation. Artists no longer tailored their expression to some kind of sacrosanct "ideal", but formulated it immanently to their own nature and to the subject.

Tomislav Krizman
 Marya Delvard
 poster, 1907.

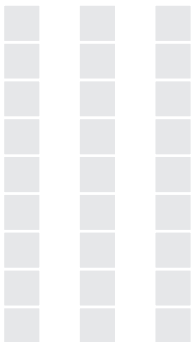
1898). He wrote, *Secession follows no one single path; on the contrary, it is an array of varying courses which have a common goal, to create a new kind of art. How that will be achieved is left to the individual artist. The common message of 'Secession' is - discover new approaches to the promised land of a new art.*

Ivo Pilar
Secesija study on modern art
 by Ivo Pilar
 Zagreb 1898.



Pilar formulated *Secession* as *inspiration for artistic rebirth* and according to his anti-academic position, *Secession means confrontation with previous schools of art because none of them express the spirit of the time we are living in, and because they contain within them a conservative, retarding element, which is the reason that art has been left behind by other advances of the human spirit of our time.* Although the Croatian writers formulated the ideological atmosphere for the change, it is the painters, sculptors and architects who led the Secession movement in Croatia.

This could in particular be seen in painting, whose development until the last decades of the nineteenth century was relatively slow, and largely based on importing paintings and artists and then adopting them. Things began to change rapidly with the appearance of Bishop J.J. Strossmayer, and later of Izidor Kršnjavi. Their role of enlightened mentors and patrons, who encouraged young and talented people to espouse art, resulted in many young Croatian artists going to study in



nearby European art centres in the last decade of the nineteenth century.

The amazing activity that Kršnjavi kindled in almost all fields of education, organization of cultural institutions and the like, despite very strong opposition, was greatly due to his autocratic temperament that would not tolerate complaints or different opinions especially in the field of art, especially in painting. At the beginning of the nineties Kršnjavi himself described the situation in Croatian painting in the following words: *At that time our only finished artists were Bukovac and Medović.* In 1893, just after he acquired his high position, Kršnjavi managed to draw to Zagreb the artist Vlaho Bukovac, who had gained an enviable international reputation, and somewhat later, in the summer of 1894, also Celestin Medović.

The coming of these already-formed artists to Zagreb, the increasingly frequent visits of young artists who were away at school, and their work together on the project of Kršnjavi's Departmental Palace, had a fundamental impact on relations in Croatian culture and art. Vlaho Bukovac's arrival was the catalyst of future events. Not only was he a strong individual, but he also brought the completely new, almost unknown French art into a milieu whose taste had primarily been formed by the Vienna Academy, and to a somewhat lesser extent by the academy in Munich, and where the main arbiter of conservatism was Iso Kršnjavi himself. Young painters, thirsty for the new and for the spirit of a world art metropolis, flocked to Bukovac. *His studio in the attic of the Academy Building became a hothouse of ideas, a true miniature art academy.* The results of the new horizons that Bukovac opened up for our young artists very quickly became visible. They abandoned the

colours and subdued tones favoured by academy and art galleries, opened up their palette, no longer tried to attain perfection of finish, and began to work according to nature. In short, a style of painting known as the *Many coloured Zagreb school* was born.

These changes, as yet not programmatically defined, led to the first dissonant notes between Bukovac and Kršnjavi and to a polarization between the old and young generation. In 1896, during preparations for the Millennium Exhibition in Budapest, the group of artists around Bukovac openly disagreed with the stands of Iso Kršnjavi. Bukovac wanted modern works by young artists to represent Croatian art, while Kršnjavi wanted to focus on more traditional work. At that time Kršnjavi's power was already on the decline. He had just resigned his governmental position, so Bukovac's concept of the free, modern presentation of Croatian art managed to prevail. As an immediate consequence of this polarization, during preparations for the Budapest exhibition some artists decided that they should separate themselves from "Kršnjavi's" *Art Society* and found a real artists' guild. This was officially formalized the following year when the Society of **Croatian Artists** was founded on **7 September 1897**.

We would not get a complete picture of what had happened if we reduced these events only to the clash between two strong figures, Bukovac and Kršnjavi, or to mere fashionable imitation of events in Vienna. This was a fundamental change of attitude toward art and its social role, completely opposite to the conservative stands personified in Iso Kršnjavi.

This new movement in Croatia did not appear in a social vacuum filled with the artistic daydreaming and empty revolutionary desires



Vlaho Bukovac
*Self-portrait
 in a white shirt*
 1897



of several marginalized artists. Their action found the support of certain prominent “pillars of society”, as can best be seen from the structure of the founding members of the **Society of Croatian Artists**. Viceroy Ban Khuen Hedervary himself opened the exhibition of Croatian Salon in the Art Pavilion in 1898, which was the first public appearance of the newly-founded society.

Nevertheless, conservative circles reacted vehemently to the action of the “young artists”, even going as far as to accuse them of national betrayal. This aspect of the events connected to the secession in Croatian art is an indication of the changes that were taking place in Croatian society, because until then what was going on in art had been almost completely marginalized and now it became the focus of public interest. What had until yesterday been a subject of conversation for



a few intellectuals and artists suddenly became a battlefield for controversy, the consequences of which are still apparent. Although the intensity of these reactions led to the withdrawal of Vlaho Bukovac and his final departure from Zagreb, the avalanche of changes that followed, despite very strong resistance, changed the image of contemporary Croatian art forever and brought it into complete synchrony with what was going on in Europe.

The Croatian Salon of 1898 is perhaps the best example of the aporia in desires and realization in which many artists - caught up in the current of events - found themselves. The expected unity of the new style and new ideas that did not exist, even the changes in relation to old practices were at first glance insignificant, (...) *the basic change was in the system of values, in the very*



meaning and content of artistic creativity. Different motivations, open to secular content, generated the themes, and this was essential. What actually took place at the Croatian Salon was liberation of artistic individuality and interpretation. Artists

Corso
 coffee
 house
 Zagreb,
 1904



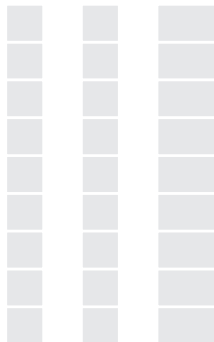
no longer tailored their expression to some kind of sacrosanct “ideal”, but formulated it immanently to their own nature and to the subject. In fact many works exhibited at the Salon had been produced in earlier years, but all of them show a great increase in the self-awareness of artists in choice of subject, expression and use of new forms, thus confirming that a situation had matured. However, the Croatian Salon was only an indication, a kind of landmark for some of the currents that Croatian art would follow in the next decades. It was not a revolution, although many contemporary critics looked on it as iconoclasm of the worst kind. At that time secession in Croatian art was considered “dangerous” more for its new ideas than for its artistic articulation. The critics realized very clearly that this was the first self-conscious, ideologically articulated movement in Croatian art leading to the modernization both of art and of the world around it. Artists were the first to recognize the changes that had already taken place in the world, and those that were yet to come, and they used their medium to try to influence the form these changes would take.

As we have already said, the main catalyst, the man who brought a new approach to art, was Vlaho Bukovac. He, like Klimt in Vienna, was an established artist with an international reputation. Neither his schooling nor his art were avant-garde, much less revolutionary, for conditions in Paris. On the contrary, in that context Bukovac could only be classified as conservative. But even the echoes of the Impressionists that did reach him were enough to light a fire of change in Zagreb. What Bukovac brought to Croatian painting at the end of the century can much sooner be defined as plein-air than as a change in the direction in which painting was moving in

Vienna or Munich at that time, and his influence resulted in the *Many coloured Zagreb school*. Still, since Art Nouveau did not move along a straight morphological line almost anywhere, nor was its appearance in different places completely simultaneous, the change in Croatian painting that took place between 1895 and 1898 can be recognized as the embryonic stage of Art Nouveau.

Anyone attempting to approach Art Nouveau with an exact definition of style would encounter many difficulties in the artwork of Vlaho Bukovac. He made compositions of romantic-academic-historicist expression for important clients, and many formal portraits, but he also developed a specific pointillism that in this early phase most clearly marked his specific understanding of Art Nouveau and openness to symbolism. In those years (1897/98) he painted *Self-Portrait in a White Shirt*, and *Japanese Woman*, on which he used a diffuse pointillist method to break up form, partly annul depth, and thus also the classical space of a painting. In 1898, after merciless attacks, Bukovac withdrew to Cavtat. Nevertheless, he took part in preparations for the Salon, attended its opening, and after that again temporarily went to Cavtat, but in fact he never returned to Zagreb again. It was in this period that he painted many compositions in pronounced Art Nouveau style, especially those belonging to the Dante Cycle.

Celestin Medović played a completely different role in these events. Like Bukovac, he too was an already completely formed painter who Kršnjavi invited to Zagreb in 1894 to act as a kind of counterweight to Bukovac and decrease his influence. But to the disappointment of Kršnjavi, Medović also joined the group around Bukovac and accepted his plein-air style, changing his



Bela Ćikoš Sesija
Walpurga's night
1898



brushwork and his palette. Medović's role was, to say the least, ambivalent in the events connected to the secession of the Bukovac group of artists from the Art Society. He, with some other painters, remained in the old association, but he was also a member of the new one, although he definitely left it immediately after the opening of the Croatian Salon in 1898. He tried to remain neutral in the raging confrontation, and then, probably under pressure from Kršnjavi, publicly spoke out against the secession, supporting a pamphlet *Anarchy in Croatian Literature and Art*. This clash between Bukovac and Medović, although remaining somewhat on the margins of the other happenings of that time, had a fundamental impact on both of them and greatly precipitated their departure from Zagreb.

In the following years Medović's painting developed, one might say, along two parallel lines: the public line - historicist subjects for clients, and the private line - in which the artist Medović painted the landscapes of Pelješac. He was thematically the most diverse Croatian painter, working on historicist compositions, portraits, landscapes and so on. His style, as we

saw, underwent fundamental changes under the influence of Bukovac: he definitely left academic painting and tones, even in historical subjects, and accentuated colours which gradually prevailed in his landscapes. At that time he also produced several landscapes that are undoubtedly symbolist.

Among the young painters who were educated in Vienna and Munich, and who Kršnjavi commissioned to decorate the building of the Department of Religious Affairs and Education, Bela Ćikoš-Sesija certainly deserves special mention. He was educated at the Vienna Academy from 1887 to 1891, and then went to the Munich Academy to train under Kršnjavi's old teacher Wilhelm Lindenschmit. This shows his very thorough and conservative academy education, which is clearly visible on his early works painted in this period. But his presence in Munich at the time when the Jugendstil was formed in 1892, his meeting with the symbolism of Franz von Stuck and his paradigmatic painting *Sin*, and his return to Zagreb in 1894, meeting with Bukovac, created preconditions for an opus that can most of all in Croatian painting be



situated in the mainstream of Art Nouveau symbolism.

At the Salon Čikoš showed several paintings that in part reflected the academism of the previous period, and also some work of pronounced symbolism, thus paving the way for the dominant form Art Nouveau took in Croatian painting - symbolism. This was certainly the most radical breakthrough and statement of modernism at this exhibition. At that time Čikoš's symbolism took the leading role, influencing almost all the secessionists, even Bukovac himself, who was at that moment creating one of the most fascinating symbolist portraits of *Baroness Rukavina*. However, Čikoš's symbolism affected Bukovac even more strongly in the Cavtat phase already mentioned. Indeed he redirected the course of Croatian painting, which had until then been based on Bukovac's plein-air and the *many coloured Zagreb school*, and turned it toward a specific form of conceptual symbolism expressed through realism. His symbolism - and because of his influence the symbolism of other Croatian artists of a similar bent - was mostly based on literary and narrative sources, and on combinations of composition, and these were exhausted relatively quickly.

Art Nouveau in Croatian sculpture did not achieve complex unity until the coming of Ivan Meštrović. He accelerated the adoption of the new art at the turn of the century by giving it more strength, which derived from a combination of various experiences: the influence of the Vienna Secession, Rodin's art, mythology and Christian ideology. Meštrović fused all these to create his own Art Nouveau tradition without which the further development of modern Croatian sculpture would be unimaginable. The special place he takes in the history of Croatian sculpture emerges from



the fact that he was the main representative of the style at the turn of the century.

Ivan Meštrović
Well of life
1905

The concept of Art Nouveau can still not be completely defined either as a movement or as a style, because of its many-faceted, diverse



Ivan Meštrović
Caryatids
Paris, 1908
Exhibited
on Secession XXXV,
Wien
1910.



and even contradictory nature. This is not only true of Croatia but also of other places, where it acquired different forms, ideas and meanings. There is still no internationally and generally accepted name for this idiom. It is known under different names in different places. In Croatia itself several terms are in use - the *many coloured Zagreb school*, *modernism*, *symbolism* - all of which refer to various aspects of its conceptual and morphological expression, partly coinciding, partly defining the variety in Croatian turn-of-the-century culture more precisely. However, the term *secesija* has been accepted as all-encompassing, because this Croatian movement towards modernity was indeed proclaimed by an act of separation, of secession.

As we have seen, Art Nouveau appeared in several conceptual and morphological variants in Croatian art, which were not always part of the typical international Art Nouveau morpheme. However, it is important to note that this art, like the entire Art Nouveau movement, helped to radically change the ingrained, conservative, traditional understanding of art, thus laying the conceptual and organizational foundations for art in the twentieth century. As art and as a social phenomenon, Art Nouveau in Croatia expressed the European *Zeitgeist* just as strongly as in the case of Vienna, Paris, Barcelona or Munich, with all the special features that emerged from Croatia's specific position at that time.

Aladar V. Baranyai
Villa Tisón
1900 - 1901

