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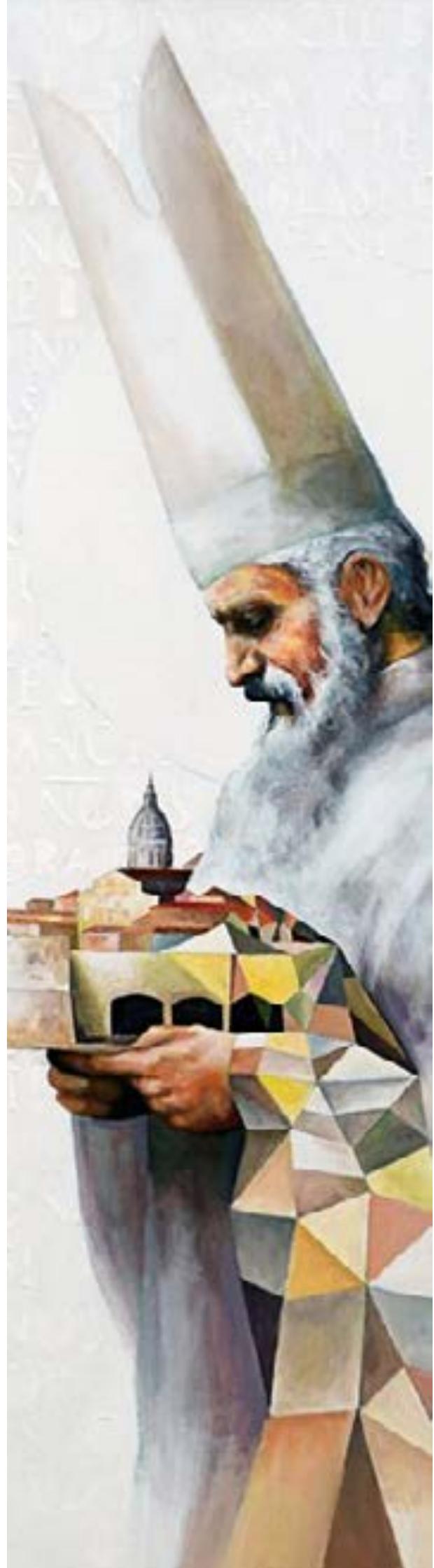
Art Readings 2019

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Eugen Varzić, Sancte Blasi Ora
Pro Nobis, 2014

On the cover:

Ivan Penkov. Sketches, Set design
of the play Tsar Simeon, 1929.
Artist's personal archive. Photo by
prof. Milena Georgieva



ИЗКУСТВОВЕДСКИ ЧЕТЕНИЯ

Тематичен рецензиран годишник за изкуствознание в два тома

ART READINGS

Thematic annual peer-reviewed edition in Art Studies, Volumes I-II

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ИЗКУСТВОВЕДСКИ ЧЕТЕНИЯ

*Тематичен рецензиран годишник за изкуствознание в два тома
2019. II. – Ново изкуство*

**МОТИВИ • МОДЕЛИ
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ART READINGS

*Thematic Peer-reviewed Annual in Art Studies, Volumes I–II
2019. II. New Art*

София, 2020

EXAMPLES OF CROATIAN MODERN AND SYRIAN SACRAL WORKS OF ART IN THE CREATIVE PROCESS FROM IDEA TO REALIZATION

Vinicije B. Lupis¹

Abstract: Sacral art is undergoing permanent change of its external clothes, however with a permanent constant of keeping the visual interpretation of the truthfulness of the Logos of Christian ecumenism. Within sacral paintings, which are a peculiar visualisation of “God’s message”, comparable to the human nature of the materialisation of the beyond, two artists, one from Croatia – Eugen Varzić and the other from Syria – Elias Ayoub, each of them in his own way, have continued, in visual terms, to develop the contemporary Christian iconography, proving repeatedly that they belong to one and the same visual ecumene of the universal language. The Croatian contemporary painter Eugen Varzić has successfully tried his hand in several categories of sacral art. The Syrian painter Elias Ayoub follows the style of postmodern figurative expressionism characterised by a strong antiwar sentiment and a clear Christian message of hope. These two modern Christian artists, each in his own way, give form to a modern imaginary world and to new perceptions of Christian painterly canons in the process of artistic creation.

Keywords: Eugen Varzić, Elias Ayoub, iconography, artistic process, canon

Introduction

The theme of this paper is the presentation of the oeuvre of two contemporary artists – the Syrian painter Elias Ayoub and the Croatian painter Eugen Varzić. Religious experience and aesthetic experience have always more or less successfully permeated. There is no religion in the history of mankind that has not expressed its experiences also through artistic searching for beauty. Beauty, in fact, has always been seen as one of the privileged links between man and the divine. The theology of Christian community has been pondering

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on the category of “beautiful” since its very beginnings. At it, theologians tie in with theoretical insights about the beauty present in Greek philosophical tradition. Here we primarily refer to Aristotle for whom “order” and “symmetry” are the supreme forms of beauty that mathematics reflects best. Christian theology of beauty has been considerably affected by Plato’s vision of the encounter with beauty as with the space of memories of eternity. Classical approaches to beauty develop the assumed ranges of Greek wisdom towards the revealed God’s beauty evidenced by the biblical texts themselves. So Augustine equates beauty with love understood as “order” and “harmony of interrelations” of those who love each other. He speaks about *ordo amoris* in God. Also the metaphysical thoughts of Thomas Aquinas about the qualities of beauty (*integritas*, *claritas* and *propertio*) find their recourse in the speech about God’s beauty².

Elias Ayoub

There are numerous links between Syrian and Croatian art, from early Christian and ancient times, as well as those viewed through the prism of Christian ecumene. With his visual art oeuvre, the Syrian painter Elias Ayoub is close to Croatian artists who through the sufferings of war and hardships experience the renewal of Christian themes of suffering or passion. Elias Ayoub clearly indicates that the new history written during the crisis is really completely different from the one before the crisis. The artist always expresses his vision in a tangible language of signs that is comparable to him, or in a personal materialised language that he himself has canonised. This visual language is real, since created by the artist himself under conditions of reality in which he finds himself. He, thus, writes a new history by his own language of signs. The painter Elias Ayoub very often is confused in present-day reality, which he tries to interpret by escaping it. This is visible in his visual art oeuvre, which is realized by an expressive visual language. The artist lives within the boundary that divides his own world and the real world, where he feels the ecstasy of artistic creation. The language of Christian iconography is fully recognisable in the work of this young Syrian artist. A socially committed artist, Pablo Picasso said that painting was “an instrument of war for attack and defence against the enemy”. For him an artist was primarily a political being, always aware of the painful, ferocious or happy events, emotionally intelligible to everyone via the universal language of visual art. In general, an artist has to fight against everything that is a threat to the freedom of the imagination. It is through this prism of the utterance of elementary expression of universal human values with a surrealist idiom that led Picasso to the

² *Bižaca*, Nikola and Jadranka Garmaz. Preface. In: *Theology, Beauty and Art. Proceedings of the International Scientific Symposium, Split, 20 and 21 October 2011*. Split, 2012, 5, 6.

painting of Guernica in 1937 that we need to see the link that leads us towards the young Syrian painter Elias Ayoub. The passion of a young painter who grew to maturity in the wartime setting of his homeland is outstanding. The tradition of French painting and the dominating vigorous colour telling of the Mediterranean universal circle link together with the same strength the young painter and the tradition of the Croatian colourists. And for this reason too, Ayoub's painting becomes ever closer to us.

Part of Ayoub's painterly oeuvre belongs to the deep Syrian Christian roots, which, with a symbolism of universal Christian inspiration, in the now majority Muslim country, are becoming rare in the contemporary Syrian painting scene. In spite of the huge Christian tradition, a thousand years of persecution have left their trace in the break in tradition, or the persistence of petrified forms, which do not satisfy the young artist. Art historian and philosopher Georges Didi-Huberman observed that Christianity is the most visual religion. Getting away from the Melchite-Byzantine traditional setting, the artist created universal Christian compositions (*Golgotha, Pietà, Angels Taking Souls to Heaven*). This is a very contemporary visual language close to the tradition of William G. Congdon (1912–1998), the reduction of motifs by colour to the elementary spiritual message of the Christian faith, with impasto applications like the Abstract Expressionist Willem de Kooning (1904–1997). In the depiction of the Madonna with Christ over the ruins Ayoub unconsciously reminds us with his emotionality of the picture *Greece on the Ruins of Missolonghi* by Eugène Delacroix, lastingly confirming the tradition of French painting in his training.

The direct impact of Christian symbolics on the visual oeuvre of Elias Ayoubis manifested through the selection of theme in the Expressionist cycle *Crucifixes*, painted in Kursk in 2015. By energetic brushstrokes, entirely in the manner of expressionism, by cubic forms he paints the composition *Crucifix*, which was preceded by a series of studies. The young Syrian artist paints it according to the general canon, and not according to the Syrian iconographic model – of Christ clothed in a long dress. In the composition *Decapitation of St John the Baptist* he returns to Syria's Christian roots and paints the martyrdom of St John according to the canon of the eastern Church, and he gives the representation the title of *Book of the Earth*. With the Golden Aureola we are reminded of the icons, however with powerful massive colours he represents the cruel reality that Christians have been going through in Syria in these years, like the Christians of Kassaband Niniveh (Mosul).

The painting *Judas' Exodus*, where Christ breaks up bread over Jerusalem, is in the tradition of the Syrian circular composition of *The Last Supper*. The symbol of the city – Damascus and Jerusalem, is the central motif of another also circular composition, *Celestial opening*. The city – Damascus reminds of celestial Jerusalem – the final vision of the Revelation, when a new heaven and a new earth are realized and God's tent with people! Elias' Celestial city, however, has one door, not twelve as Jerusalem, because this is his Damas-

cus. With a modicum of abstraction, the painter Ayoub has remained true to figuration, abandoning it only when profoundly emotional states could not be expressed save through an explosion of colours of contrasting surfaces, reflecting the restlessness of the world in which he lives. Elias inherited his Expressionist note from the visual influence of the Syrian artist Marwan Kassab-Bachi (1934–2016), who during the late fifties studied in the Berlin Academy and belonged to the circle of Georg Baselitz and Eugen Schoenebeck, who drew on the principles of the German Expressionists.

But Elias' intensity of colouring is in many ways closer to the inheritance of the tradition of Georges Rouault and Marc Chagall, whether in colouring or whether in view of the commitment inherent in the artist's visual language. The first Adam and the first Eve are found most literally painted in the composition *Love in Damascus 2*, whereas *Love in Damascus 1* is an intimistic composition. The artist uses the proportion 1/5 of Byzantine icons, and the golden colour in the background of the composition, transposing thereby the Melchite tradition of Orthodox Syrian art. This tendency is best felt in the composition *In black*, of bereaved women – like the reminiscence *Women at the grave*. Thus the composition *Vital grail (Goblet of life)* is a reinterpretation of the Expulsion from Heaven, and the composition *Between dream and reality*, a paraphrase of the Flight to Egypt from the town of Bethlehem.

The moving painting *Damascus in the eyes of a stranger*, with its hard lines, ominous black and blood red colour still offers hope with the depiction of two doves in the foreground. An authoritative drawing, an acute chromaticism and an exceptional artistic culture are reflected in the metaphysical imaginary of the motifs of the painting. Painter Ayoub makes use of the doves as symbol of peace, hinting at peace in his homeland, as in a whole series of watercolours of doves in an earlier artistic cycle from Kursk in 2015. The doves in the visual language of Elias' work are a tradition of Christian symbolism – symbols of peace, of the human soul and of soteriological redemption. In the Law of Moses, the dove is pronounced a clean animal, and so it is sacrificed in the rite of purification after the birth of a child, a new life. Also Biblical is the dove that comes with the olive branch in its beak after the flood, heralding the revival of life. In the painting *Black rain* the dove is the herald of hope, picked out in a separate cloud, and with its synthetic Cubist approach redefines Christian iconography, as in the painting *Dust of war*, where in rhythmical planes there is a sense of balance, strength and purity of composition in a tradition of an early blend of Impressionists and Cubists.

The painting *Childbirth* is best illustrated by Elias' composition that is opposed to the Christmas tree – a photograph by his Syrian Christian friend from the war theatre. Exactly these elements of Christian heritage that follow real life are the best confirmation of the livingness of Elias' art. *Pre-war memories* is a composition founded on a young male nude in the foreground under a tree on which there are apples – symbol of original sin. This is also a

paraphrase of Michelangelo's Adam, which is also the *lignum vitae*, the tree of life, which will grow from Adam's skull. According to medieval legend, Eve, who was taught by Archangel Michael, planted on Adam's grave a twig from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. From it grew a tree, and King Solomon replanted it in the garden of the Temple; afterwards it was cut down and thrown into the Bethesda fish pond, and then dragged out to be made into the Cross. In the background are the evil persecutors, counterpointing two worlds and the two futures of his land. A fellow citizen of Elias, St John of Damascus (675/6 – 749), was straightforward in his defence of piety with respect to holy paintings and wrote: "In the old days, the incorporeal and infinite God was never depicted. [...] I do not worship matter, I worship the God of matter, who became matter for my sake, and deigned to inhabit matter, who worked out my salvation through matter. I will not cease from honouring that matter which works my salvation. I venerate it, though not as God! [...]" The painting with the theme *The beginning of soul's journey*, painted in Russia in 2015, is among the visions of hope, as well as the painting *Open to heaven* from the same cycle, where the souls of the death are above the City.

Elias Ayoub is a profoundly spiritual Christian painter from Syria, clearly bearing the tradition of Syrian Christianity, of ancient civilisation and of European painting, creating a new quality, a symbiosis of Western and Eastern painting. Syria, which has put world civilisation and the Croatian cultural heritage too in its debt – with Christian basilicas of the Syrian type around Mljet, Korčula and Salona, and above all with St Domnius, Split martyr, and many other works of the Croatian cultural heritage – is suitably represented in the person of the painter Elias Ayoub. Elias' Christian view of contemporary painting emanates a spirit that belongs to the single Christian ecumene, or the faith in that God that became flesh and made himself visible. His painting is congruous with the tradition of the Church, whose doctrine of the sacraments says that material substances taken from nature can become conductors of the grace of Joyful news³.

Eugen Varzić

The painter Eugen Varzić is a particular personality on the Croatian visual art scene, since he has continued his visual development, or research path respectively, in a different direction as compared to standard visual trends. This is a painter who carries war memories, about which he clearly spoke in his earlier visual cycles *Another world* and *Noir*, in which, through Christian symbolics, he has clearly experienced his catharsis⁴. It is about the building of

3 *Lupis*, Vinicije B., Elias Ayoub Damaskinos. Slikar nade. In: Ljubav u Damasku/Love in Damascus, exhibition catalogue. Dubrovnik, 2017, 6–13.

4 *Lupis*, Vinicije B. Moji snovi i ispovijesti. In: *Noir*, exhibition catalogue. Poreč, 2014, 1; *Lupis*, Vinicije B., Gubitak apsoluta i nestanak anđela. In: *Drugi svijet*, exhibition catalogue. Poreč, 2012, 2.

the visual art of the contemporary Croatian painter on the heritage of current visual aspirations of American painting of the 20th century – painting that has been formed based on heterogeneous visual heritage created on the tide of immigration to the American continent⁵. Contemporary American painting has always been directed towards Naturalism and Realism of the visual presentation. The tendency of creation in the spirit of the *trompe-l'oeil* illusionistic style, relying on the American philosophical trend of pragmatism, is an enduring constant in American art during the entire 20th century, which was indirectly taken over by the painter Eugen Varzić⁶. In the cycle *Noir* he brings in a confessional tone a series of known personalities from the world he is surrounded by since childhood, youth, family, up to icons from contemporary life.

The painterly language of contemporary spirituality is clear and determined, carrying within it deep Christian roots, love for the brotherly human, however also all the burden of cultivated sensitivity for the present-day alienation. In this cycle, the painter Varzić has created a metaphysical language similar to that of Giorgio de Chirico, inspired by mystical and fantastical Surrealism, creating a special imaginarium, an atmosphere of sorrow, transitoriness, as well as of war experience.

The artist's family is like a cliff on which Romana's portrait with its lyrical note reveals love and safety. She is always at the centre of his Universe, painted in warm shades, like a new Eve. In the *New world* cycle his *Mother with a burning heart*, painted after the classical Catholic iconography, is an expression of immersion in the depth of one's own roots, and a confirmation that Eugen Varzić is not a painter of a new trend, under the now conventional title of new Croatian Realism, but he is a mysticist painter. The mystic heart of love eliminates all troubles and evil in the turmoil of relativisation of moral values of the present day, in which the artist creates his works.

Varzić is thus a painter of the new mystical and fantastic Croatian Surrealism. The painting *Endless or Weltsmertz* comprises clear Christian symbols, however a powerful echo is felt in it of the attack against Christianity by terrorists, and of brutal executions broadcasted live. Tradition has been used to speak of fear, of threat, on the one side by neo-liberal ideas, on the other side by terrorists, and on the third side by concussions and scandals within the Christian Church itself. The symbol of safety – St Peter's Church, painted in cubistic forms, is visible in the distance in front of the Swiss guardsman, standing with his back to the spectators. With his look directed towards the basilica, in the manner of De Chirico's silent metaphysical characters, he poses the question on Where is the Church going? From the old-time processions of the town of Poreč, in

5 *Prown*, Jules David. *American Painting from its Beginnings to the Armory Show*, Skira/Rizzoli. Geneva, 1987, 7–9.

6 *Rose*, Barbara. *American Painting. The Twentieth Century*, Skira/Rizzoli. Geneva, 1986, 7.

its shades comes up the figure of the Roman bishop in contemplation over the presence of human existence, with the inscription PAX. With a dark image the institution of the Church is examined, its righteous role or spiritual shallowness. By its composition, the *Boy from the water* reminds of the crucified Christ, whereas all other visual and painterly elements belong to the present day. This is the presentation of a self-portrait, a levitating man – the painter in heaven, which increasingly ceases to be the home to angels.

Eugen Varzić is a sharp critic of society, who in the figure of *Christ with defragmented face* – with a paradigmatic sign of losing connection with Logos, the all-ruler of human souls in a dehumanised world deprived of God, in the society in which we live – continues his questioning from the earlier visual cycle in which Christ, crucified in the cosmic wide space, is wept for with angel blood tears. The iconoclasm of modern history, of extermination of the Pantocrator by commercial *jumbo* posters, is the everyday course of life of our materialistic world. This picture is the best response to the absence of vicinity of His face wiped out through alienation of the soul.

We should know that in the creative process, painting, there are three ways in which, to a lesser or higher degree, authorship, direct and indirect reliance on models and tradition permeate, as well as consequent respect for sacral themes through Christian iconography and reference to a style period that the client usually requests from the painter as the visual artist.

Within the younger generation of painters on the Croatian visual art scene, Eugen Varzić, academic painter from Poreč, most certainly takes a special place, precisely in the field of figuration and painting of sacral themes of larger format. In the territory of the Bishopric of Dubrovnik he has realized over the past years a series of works of art: the copy of the *Mother of God* from Ston, following the original by Andrea Ritzos da Candia (1422–1492) in Ston; in late 2011, Eugen Varzić paints for the Confraternity of St Vincen ca under the protection of the Heart of Jesus in Blato the painting *Heart of Jesus* following the visual model by Pompeo Batoni, created in the 18th century for the Roman church *Il Gesù*. Here as well, like in the example of *Our Lady of Ston*, the painter has proven his masterful command of the painterly technique, his knowledge of the heritage, along with a discrete Modernism of his visual expression. For the church of St John the Baptist in Basina, church parish of St Michael in Viganj on the peninsula of Pelješac, painter Varzić painted, as a painterly commission for this modest sacral space, the impressive altar pala, for which the iconographic model has been taken over from the Early Renaissance painter Pietro Della Francesca, and for the Franciscan monastery in Podgorje he painted an also exceptionally important altar pala. In the artist's oeuvre there is a special innovativeness in presenting the cult representation of St Blaise, in which he combines in a special new manner the Baroque way of painting the Saint's image, within the Gothic arc opening, alluding to the Gothic city gate over the city model. Among other visual works that rely on

tradition, introducing changes in terms of technique or visual interventions that separate the sacral representation from the traditional or figurative one, two examples of the crucified Christ after Michelangelo's drawing can be singled out. The artist also copies the altar pala of the model by painter Tiziano from the Dubrovnik Dominican Monastery, researching into his painterly capacities, as is also the case with the altar palas of St Anthony the Abbot and St Nicholas.

Reduction and creation of so-called new or author visual works with sacral themes are observable in the work *Absolution* of 2012, a diptych dominated by the colours white and earthy-red, like the colours from Early Christian catacombs, but again sufficiently elaborated to collate the visual work in the 21st century. The pixelisation of Christ belongs to rather audacious visual ideas within the painter's oeuvre. In addition, the mosaic *Portus Cervus* has a direct iconographic link with the Christian symbolic, however in technical terms a more freehand approach in composing the mosaic has been used, reducing the motif to the simplicity of a logotype. On the front of the church of St Anthony in Korčula a type of mosaic has been used that adorns the fronts of basilicas all over the world. In this visual work there is almost no decoration, except for the inscription *Venite ad me omnes* and the letters alpha and omega. The rest of the composition is dominated by a golden background, like in historic examples, and the whiteness of the stone of the church front has served as a visual contrast. Christ's domination has been pointed out by colder shades of the clothes, so that in the environs in which the church is located the mosaic assumes an absolute visual domination and sends a clear Christian message.

The painting *Sancti Blasi Ora Pro Nobis* can be regarded as the artist's most successful visual work with sacral theme. It represents the Dubrovnik Saint who is leaning forward towards the City that he has been patronising for centuries and who has been ardently honoured. The painter's wish was to represent this unconditional love, the heavenly protection and worldly gratitude by connecting the City with the body of its patron. By the painterly method of using patterns and 3D gel for acrylic, he multiplied the prayer in Latin, which served as background, realizing a visual dynamic within the whiteness. The change in the representation of St Blaise refers also to his position, which is not frontal, with his look directed towards heaven and in a posture of benediction of the City. The painter has painted the figure of the Saint in profile, and has put the City into his hands, in order to emphasise all the more his love, protection and his being worshipped.

A work of utmost importance in Eugen Varzić's oeuvre is the painting *Sunday*, with the representation of the late grandmother of the artist's wife, Nona, as they used to call her. As the last in the family who was tied to tradition, Nona considered holidays to be very important, held the family dear, as well as some elements that are fading today and relate to small, sincere forms of respect, belief. It is as if with our elderly all these forms of Christian traditional values close to man disappeared! It all began with *Nona's* portrait,

which appeared in the artist's earlier visual cycle *Noire*. In fact, the figure of Nona – a person with whom he had a special emotional relationship – opened up entirely new worlds to him. Varzić's *Nona* has become a work of art that introduced Croatian contemporary painting, in the personality of Eugen Varzić, into a new undertaking of visual search on the horizon of the general European visual art scene. The wisdom of a woman who has survived all changes in Istria during the 20th century, from fascism, which suffocated the Croatian hood of the Istrian land, up to communism, which came to Istria with the Croatian liberation fight for freedom and suppressed the general Catholic humanism by the murder of the beatus Bulešić – a cousin of Nona. Departures without return, arrivals of new people, *Nona* – the personification of Croatian Istria, observed all this leaning on the washing machine on which there was a common kitchen towel. This is a towel with which the past is covered, grounds from oldest Glagolitic inscriptions, plagues, wars, exodus – these are codes of memories of the *Holy Wisdom*. *Nona* is the Holy Wisdom – Saint Sophia of the Istrian land. Like Grant Wood with his painting *American Gothic*, the painter Eugen Varzić has created, in terms of motif, a cult painting of the state of Croatian identity of Istria and of the historic significance of the 20th century – through the eyes of a woman, keeper of the home and of tradition. This is not the tired Europe from his earlier cycle, this is a cult figure of a woman interpreted by a contemporary visual language, where the banality of the sight has been raised to the throne of timeless spirituality. It has to be stressed again that Eugen Varzić belongs to a group of painters who surpass national boundaries, and who are closest to the phenomenon of new Realism and new Portraitism in American art after World War Two, with their most important representative Jamie Wyeth⁷. Sacral art is undergoing permanent change of its external clothes, however with a permanent constant of keeping the visual interpretation of the truthfulness of the Logos of Christian ecumenism. Within sacral paintings, which are a peculiar visualisation of “God's message”, comparable to the human nature of the materialisation of the beyond, two artists, one from Croatia – Eugen Varzić and the other from Syria – Elias Ayoub, each of them in his own way, have continued, in visual terms, to develop the contemporary Christian iconography, proving repeatedly that they belong to one and the same visual ecumene of the universal language.

⁷ Rolland, Romain. Michelangelo. Zagreb, 1940, 17.

Illustrations:



1. Elias Ayoub, Crucifixion, 2015, Kućište, Republika Hrvatska



2. Eugene Delacroix, *Greece on the Ruins of Missolonghi*, 1827, Bordeaux, Musée des Braux-Arts



3. *Elias Ayoub, Lady of Sorrow with Christ on the Ruins of Syria, 2017, (artist collection)*



4. Elias Ayoub, *Love in Damascus 2*, 2017



5. *Eugen Varzić, My God, 2014*



6. *Eugen Varzić, Nona, 2018*



7. Eugen Varzić, *Sancte Blasi Ora Pro Nobis*, 2014



8. Eugen Varzić, *Labirint*, 2014

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ПРИМЕРИ ЗА ХЪРВАТСКИ МОДЕРНИ И СИРИЙСКИ САКРАЛНИ ПРОИЗВЕДЕНИЯ НА ИЗКУСТВОТО В ТВОРЧЕСКИЯ ПРОЦЕС – ОТ ИДЕЯТА ДО РЕАЛИЗАЦИЯТА

Виницие Б. Лупис

Резюме: Сакралното изкуство претърпява постоянна промяна на външните си одежди, но с постоянна константа за запазване на визуалната интерпретация на истинността на Логосите на християнския екуменизъм. В сакралните картини, които са своеобразна визуализация на „Божие послание“, сравнима с човешката природа на материализация на Отвъдното, двама художници, единият от Хърватия – Еуген Варзич, и другият от Сирия – Елиас Ейуб, (всеки от тях по свой начин), продължават във визуално отношение да развиват съвременната християнска иконография, доказвайки многократно, че принадлежат към един и същ визуален екумен на универсалния език. Хърватският съвременен художник Еуген Варзич успешно се опитва в няколко категории на сакралното изкуство. Сирийският художник Елиас Ейуб следва стила на постмодерния образен експресионизъм, характеризира се със силни антивоенни настроения и ясно християнско послание за надежда. Тези двама съвременни християнски художници по свой начин, придават форма на модерния въображаем свят и на новите възприятия на християнските живописни канони в процеса на художественото творчество.

Ключови думи: Еуген Варзич, Елиас Ейуб, иконография, художествен процес, канон

Изкуствоведски четения 2019

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