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Classical elements in the work of Ivan Meštrović

Croatian artist Ivan Meštrović (Vrpolje, Croatia, 1883 – South Bend, USA, 1962) was involved in the most important artistic and political events in his homeland during the first half of the 20th century. A student of sculpture and architecture at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna (1901–1906), he made his name during his studies as an artist close to the circles of Auguste Rodin (who became his friend) and Gustav Klimt. Within all the stylistic changes (Art Nouveau, expressionism, art déco, etc.), one has to discern a strong notion of classical tradition and constant implementation of antique and renaissance references, which he reinterpreted according to current stylistic trends and his own artistic identity. In my PhD thesis I will primarily focus on his artistic and architectural works from the first to the fourth decade of the 20th century.

After defining the classical elements and their modalities at the level of content and subjects, I will focus on the relation between classical component and the modernism. In the second section, I will draw special attention to Meštrović's period in Vienna. I will include the examples of Central European artists who were studying, living and exhibiting in the capital of Austro-Hungarian Empire, such as Anton Hanak, Jan Štursa, Stanislav Sucharda, Bohumil Kafka and Franz Metzner.

The third major topic of my research is the usage of classical elements in the formation of the sculptural and architectural projects with the aim of creating the paradigm of national myth and political propaganda. The question of the South Slav identity and of detaching Croatia from the Austro-Hungarian Empire became a momentous issue in 1908 after the annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which pushed Meštrović to leave Vienna and settle down in Paris, where he lived for two years (1908 – 1909). There he worked out the project for the *Temple of St Vidovdan* which was never to be built. He created some fifty sculptures and a wooden maquette. From 1910 to 1919 Meštrović's solo and collective exhibition projects were marked by a distinct engagement and by his propagation of the South Slav idea, like the one-man exhibition in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London

in 1915. In the same year he was involved in the foundation of the Yugoslav Committee, which propagated the dismantling of Austro-Hungary and the foundation of a common South Slav state. My intention is to compare Meštrović's development of South Eastern Slavic mythology and his origins of monumentalism in sculpture and architecture, with other national projects which are based on utopian ideas; often glorifying a particular political system, unifying the architecture and sculpture, using antique and renaissance references and they remain unrealized, due to their megalomaniac dimension.

Fourth topic correlates with the inter-war period and Meštrović's return to order. I am analyzing his position of the official artist in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes and his role at the Academy of Fine Arts in Zagreb, where he was rector and professor. His monuments and architectural projects from this period were marked by monumentalism and Neo-classicism. The *statuomania* reached its peak in Western Europe just before the beginning of the Great War, but it really only started in Central and Eastern Europe after the end of the First World War when the new national states have been established. I will look into Meštrović's role in the *statomania*, and using the platform of classical tradition to create monuments and buildings that emanate the strong political and historical meaning, in his homeland and other countries (Rumania, Czechoslovakia, Poland), and also into his role as the cultural diplomat. Although he was the leading artist in the new state, he soon became disappointed with the political oppression and the Serbian domination. He used his contacts, for instance those with the Masaryk family, to conduct his own political and cultural diplomacy.

I have found some of the firm points in the methodology for my PhD research in the publications such as *Modern Art despite Modernism*, (ed.) Robert Storr, the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2000; Emily, Braun, Herbert, James D., Jeanne Anne Nugent, Silver, Kenneth E, *Chaos & Classicism: Art in France, Italy, and Germany, 1918 – 1936*, Guggenheim Museum Publications, New York, 2011. However, those and other recent exhibition and research projects show the evident lack of focus on South Eastern and Central European artists. The goal of my research is to point out Ivan Meštrović's role of an artist who was building cultural and political bridges between the Western, Central and South Eastern Europe.