

Mirna Međeral

University of Zagreb

The Collector: Research into Provenance of Artworks from the Ante Topić Mimara Collection

The main objective of this PhD thesis was to establish the provenance of artworks which mysterious Croatian art collector Ante Topić (Topitsch) Mimara (1898-1987) acquired during his lifetime. At first, the research focused primarily on works of art which Mimara donated to the SR Croatia in 70s and which now form the core collection of the Mimara Museum in Zagreb. This diverse collection numbers over 3700 objects of art from various periods and regions of the world, with particular emphasis on renaissance and baroque paintings and sculptures, complemented with rich collections of ivories, ceramics, glass and textiles. However, the scope of the research broadened as the research progressed, thus soon including the artworks which Mimara donated to the Strossmayer Gallery in the 60s and numerous works of art which he owned but sold during his lifetime. This wider research frame was necessary in order to gain a better understanding of Mimara's collecting methodology and his practices as an art dealer, which were, until now, as mysterious as the collector himself.

Although more than 30 years passed since the death of A. T. Mimara, little is known of his life and work, which hindered objective evaluation of his role in Croatian culture and impact on international art market of the 20th century. The lack of reliable biographical data made it impossible to determine Mimara's life-path and when and how he acquired artworks for his collection. He was always on the move: Rome, Paris, London, Montevideo, Berlin, Cologne, Frankfurt am Main, Tangier and Zagreb are only some of the cities where he resided and worked. Mimara's occupation cannot be described with one word only – although he presented himself as a painter and art collector, he was also a shrewd art dealer and a socialite who knew well how to exploit his political connections in order to gain influence, social status and financial means necessary to amass a significant art collection. He first caught the attention of the public eye in 1963 when, after lengthy negotiations, he sold precious medieval ivory cross to the Metropolitan Museum for 600 000 \$. The sale of this cross, known as the Bury St. Edmunds cross, was marked with controversy as Mimara refused to provide the Met with the provenance, thus raising doubts about his right of ownership and legality of acquisition.

Mimara was always secretive about the provenance of his art collection and he never officially disclosed the sources from which he acquired numerous paintings, sculptures and other objects of art. Even in acts of his generosity – his two donations which now form a part of Strossmayer Gallery and core collection of the Mimara Museum – he maintained

his firm stance and refused to reveal the provenance of donated works of art. Since Mimara lived in Berlin during the 30s and the period of Nazi government, many believed that his vast collection was built on stolen and Nazi-looted goods. Others, who perceived Mimara as a swindler, denounced his collection as the "great hoax", consisting mostly out of blatant fakes and forgeries, which, understandably, own no provenance at all. Hindered by so many unfavourable circumstances, the research into provenance of artworks from the Mimara collection proved to be challenging and complex, yet immensely intriguing feat, which resulted in numerous interesting revelations.

The presentation will offer a short introduction into fascinating life of A. T. Mimara, followed by the discussion of the problem of study and interpretation of artistic and historic value of his art collection. This problem required specific interdisciplinary approach, which included object study and extensive archive research, combined with study of Mimara's biography. The practical application of research methodology will be demonstrated on a selected example from the collection of Mimara Museum - a heavily overpainted representation of "Christ with Symbols of Passion", which was donated by Mimara as a work by Botticelli. Is this "Christ" just one of Mimara's fakes or is it a misunderstood and overlooked gem which speaks volumes about Mimara and the way he acquired artworks for his collection?