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LOCAL, ETHNOGRAPHIC, AND ORIENTAL MOTIF OR DETAIL IN THE FOLK PORTRAITS BY NADEŽDA PETROVIĆ AND ZORA PETROVIĆ**

ABSTRACT: This paper focuses on portraits in folk costumes in the paintings by Nadežda Petrović and Zora Petrović. Distant in time and from different ideological positions, these two different personalities use folk costumes as a subject matter in creating a modernist image. Interesting conclusions can be reached in the research of folk portraits. In addition to the already known general issues about the painting by Nadežda Petrović (revealing national identity) and Zora Petrović, there are distant echoes of local and transformed Orientalism. Orientalism is not meant here in its full, centralist, dominant meaning of the popular, fashionable, and commercial trend in the West in the 19th and early 20th centuries. It is about spreading the elements of Orientalism in the Balkans and southern Serbia under the Ottoman influence. From the centre of Orientalism to its periphery, it was diluted into autochthonous wholes of national, ethnic costumes or details. Therefore, this paper does not regard it as Orientalism of the centre. Instead, it becomes just a part of customs, fashion, details of national costume, etc. Furthermore, it can be concluded that both paintresses, although starting from different ideological points, attained their modernism as an ultimate goal, through an important transitional phase in which the national folk costume was a capital subject matter.

KEYWORDS: Nadežda Petrović, Zora Petrović, modernism, national, oriental.

The process of discovering the unknown, unexplored, or “tucked away” monuments, sacral items, or ethnographic material of people from the periphery and borderline regions of Serbia, gathered momentum in the 19th century following the liberation of the territories occupied by the Ottoman Empire. Among the pioneering researchers such as Mihailo Valtrović, the most influential was Đorđe Krstić. What was presented by Krstić as the mystical beauty of the yet undiscovered periphery, Nadežda Petrović (1873–1915), his faithful disciple,

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positioned as the thematic and ideational focus of her painting in the 1903–1910 period. She stood for a modernist interpretation of the newly discovered ethnographic material and traditional national costumes. She was primarily focused on the Serbian deep periphery. The scenes that she presented could be viewed as domestic “Orientalism”, an urban perception of an undiscovered rural world. Orientalism, being popular and well known in the centres where Nadežda (Munich) and Zora (Budapest) studied, may have influenced these two painters. This is particularly true for Nadežda, who discovered a world that existed on the far-off borders of the Ottoman Empire. Nadežda, as well as Zora Petrović, the younger of the two, focused on the specific characteristics of the local environment. However, it was unsurprisingly marked by some oriental elements. Thus, among other things, they created a special, independent, domestic kind of “Orientalism”².

Although portraits constituted a considerable whole, the part of Nadežda’s opus carried out in the domain of ethnographic and national themes, conveying both documentary and ideological meanings and developed during the First Yugoslav Art Colony, cannot be ignored. They were created primarily in 1905 and 1906, mostly in Resnik, Sićevo and its surroundings, along the Nišava River Basin, and in the vicinity of Pirot. On this particular occasion, the focus is on the portraits created in the field, in art colonies, and during her travels – portraits of common people in everyday traditional national clothes, but more often in Serbian national costumes worn for festive occasions. Nadežda aimed her innovative, emancipatory, modernist, and clearly expressed aspirations towards the ethnos and national identity. These country people’s portraits created in Serbia and the regions under Ottoman occupation (South Serbia, Kosovo and Metohija, Macedonia) are contents wherein she manifested her modern experimental method, which entirely separates her from the reigning academic realism, historical compositions, and people dressed in adorned traditional national costumes, as well as images and sceneries.

It was yet another manifest expression of Nadežda’s modernity, surprising in the painterly circles after 1900, testifying to her opposition to the stereotype of the bourgeois composition of representative portraits (or historical narratives), “as much removed from the quotidian as the dominant taste of the emergent bourgeoisie could distance itself from its non-urban, provincial, country origins and seek a new identity” (MERENIK 2005: 58). The question that should be raised at this point is that of the origin of her motivation to opt not for documenting or idealising a rural Arcadia, like most of her predecessors (Krstić, Predić, Jovanović), but for presenting a truthful, unflattering and expressive corpus of rural portraits painted in a modern manner.

¹ It is useful to emphasise again that Orientalism is not meant here in its full, centralist, dominant meaning of the popular, fashionable, and commercial trend in the West in the 19th and early 20th centuries. It is about spreading the elements of Orientalism in the Balkans and southern Serbia under the Ottoman influence. From the centre of Orientalism to its periphery, it was diluted into autochthonous wholes of national, ethnic costumes or details. Therefore, this paper does not regard it as Orientalism of the centre. Instead, it becomes just a part of customs, fashion, details of national costume, etc.

² As explained in footnote no. 1.



Fig. 1. Nadežda Petrović, *Funeral in Sićevo*, 1905, oil on cardboard, 99.5 × 156.5 cm, Museum of Contemporary Art, Belgrade
Надежда Петровић, *Појреб у Сићеву*, 1905, уље на картону, 99,5 × 156,5 цм, Музеј савремене уметности, Београд

The urge to legitimise and appropriate country and national identity is the specific difference that motivated Nadežda to create a unique new type of picture in the early 20th-century Serbian painting.

She provided a local (Serbian), autochthonous variant of popular Orientalism, already well known in Europe at the time. Nevertheless, she was opposed to “pompier-type tendencies in art, which were meant to adjust art to the taste and relative understanding of the majority of the audience”, and she strove for free, untrammelled development of art, outside the boundaries of firm social constructs (АМБРОЗИЋ 1978: 327).

Nadežda insisted on a specific type of costume and a repertory of objects that underscored her *policy of vision* – primarily on local and national costumes as the main characteristic of a regional and, above all, national identity. Her most prominent picture painted in this vein is *Funeral in Sićevo*, which synthesizes her quick and abrupt painterly mode, containing a night-time landscape and a group of countrymen wearing local (Sićevo) costumes. *A Woman from Prizren* (1905)³ is a typical example of this. The somber atmosphere of

³ Detailed descriptions of the mentioned costumes: ШОБИЋ 1956.



Fig. 2. Nadežda Petrović, *Two Peasant Women*, 1905, oil on cardboard, 67.5 × 96.5 cm, National Museum of Serbia, Belgrade

Надежда Петровић, *Две сељанке*, 1905, уље на картону, 67,5 × 96,5 цм, Народни музеј Србије, Београд

A Woman from Prizren is contrasted with the cheerful tone of the picture *Two Country Women* (1905). These two young women wear *yelek* (Srp. jelek)⁴. Yelek is of oriental origin. It was worn in several Balkan countries and was very popular in Serbia where it was considered a symbol of female national costume. Furthermore, neckless (Srp. đerdan)⁵, is of oriental origin and is not unique to Serbia or Serbian folk costume. Aprons decorated or woven, which are part of the Serbian costume, are also widespread in several Balkan regions and are not specific only to Serbia.

Apart from folk costumes, Nadežda also insisted on the typical characteristics of everyday work activities or rare moments of leisure – *Peasant Woman with a Yoke* (1905); *Two Peasant Women with Yokes* (1906); *Peasant Women at a Well (At a Well)* (1906) are among her most spontaneous scenes, integrated with their surroundings. In addition, her

⁴ Tur. yelek; Eng. vest, waistcoat; Srp. jelek, prsluk.

⁵ *Gerdan* or *neck* in literal translation. A necklace worn tightly around the neck (Tur. gerdan, Srp. đerdan).

other works worth mentioning are *Shepherd Playing the Flute* (1906) and *The Gusle Player* (1906).

To the extent that the *Balkan myth*, (NORIS 2002: 1) primarily in Pavle (Paja) Jovanović's oriental compositions (popular and generally commercial in the West), could represent an exotic⁶ *revelation* for Western Europe, the pictures by Đorđe Krstić could represent a *revelation* of an equally exotic, folklore-type Serbia. The West, it would appear, could only accept the Balkans through flattering – pastoral – exotic and oriental images; otherwise, it was stereotypically and brutally characterised as a “place of confusion and trouble”.⁷ (MERENIK 2005: 56).

Zora Petrović, as opposed to Nadežda Petrović and twenty-one years her junior, painted folklore-type motifs in female portraits and figures merely as one of the elements of her voluminous opus of portraits, still life, nudes, and landscapes. She painted her first portraits of women in national costumes⁸ in and around 1937 (*Country Woman, Macedonian Woman, Country Woman from Crna Trava*), continuing to do so from other conceptual and, possibly, ideological positions during her “folkloristic phase” (from circa 1945 to circa 1955) (PROTIĆ 1978: 14). However, it is obvious that the model for *Country Woman from Crna Trava* posed in the bourgeois atmosphere of Zora's studio or drawing room. In terms of style, verve, realisation, and treatment of the body, it was only Zora, decades after Nadežda, who became a true continuator of her painting. Zora's authentic portraits of country women dating from 1937 could be placed on a sequence or a trend of portraying women in national⁹ costumes (Šumanović's *Ruthenian Women*¹⁰ provide a good example of this), thus pointing to continuity with Nadežda's pictures. After 1945, Zora entirely changed the meaning and even the ideology of this type of picture. Zora did not take field trips to do portraits of women in national costumes. She found her models most likely among the country women she met in the green market, of whom she did portraits in her studio – an example of this could be the aforementioned *Country Woman from Crna Trava* (1941) or *Woman in an Armchair* (s.d.). She then raised the criterion level of Nadežda's ideal of the modern picture – in the case of portraits and figures in folk costumes, she was solely interested in colour, relations between colours, and other painterly compositional means, but she rejected the ideal of ethnos and national identity. It is possible that soon after 1945, in the era of socialist realism, Zora, just like many other artists active in the interwar period, sought a less travelled path, a shift away from the obligatory, dogmatic painting, resolving this issue by emphasizing

⁶ Exotic is referred to as the Western perception of the Balkans.

⁷ One of the most unpleasant events, from the point of view of the Western public, and also decisive for its most often negative view of the Balkans as the cause and instigator of trouble for “civilised Europe”, was certainly the assassination of King Aleksandar Obrenović and Queen Draga. *The New York Times* wrote that throwing their dead bodies out of the window was “a racial characteristic typical of primitive Slavs”. Quoted from: TODOROVA 1999.

⁸ This paper focuses on Zora's paintings created in the studio – a) on “costuming”, and b) on authentic folk costumes painted in Zora's private, urban setting.

⁹ Not only or particularly Serbian national costumes.

¹⁰ *Rusinke* (Srp.)



Fig. 3. Zora Petrović, *A Girl from Skopska Crna Gora – A Portrait of Pantress Danica Antić*, oil on canvas, 100 × 80 cm, around 1952, Gallery of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Belgrade

Зора Петровић, *Девојка из Скојске Црне Горе – портрет сликарке Данице Антић*, уље на платну, 100 × 80, око 1952, Уметничка галерија САНУ, Београд

“brotherhood and unity” or “ethnicity” (ČUBRILLO 2011: 89–92). Socialist realism, following the second, new communist Yugoslavia, insisted on the ideal of brotherhood and unity of peoples and nationalities. The folk costumes of all regions of socialist Yugoslavia were a suitable visual representation of that ideal.

In her “folkloristic phase” of the 1950s, freed¹¹ from the Communist Party and dogmatic supervision of art, Zora carried out an incredible turnabout. She painted folk clothes as costumes – thus creating “costumed folklore” (ČUBRILLO 2011: 85–100), faintly reminiscent of the local “Orientalism”, ethnos, and identity. She dressed her models in various costumes. The best, but by no means the only example of this is her portrait of Danica Antić entitled *A Girl from Skopska Crna Gora* (1952). Other paintings also point to the thesis put forward by Jasmina Čubrilo (ČUBRILLO: 2011). *Composition with a Wooden Horse* (before 1952), *Country Women*, and *Serbian Country Woman* (both painted before 1956) point to the possibility that Zora painted the same woman model. Namely, the figure on the left in the picture *Country Women* and the standing portrait *Serbian Country Woman* are identical (she probably used the same models when she produced nude paintings). This also supports the thesis about costuming, a folkloristic performance in the studio, not about a true image or genre scene, as was the case with Nadežda. That Zora Petrović accepted costuming as her method of painting women in national costumes is also proved by a photograph taken in 1938, which shows a costumed model and Zora in front of the easel in her studio. It is quite possible that Zora Petrović started this experiment in creating a surrogate of the authentic as far back as the 1930s, and that she continued it, with a greater degree of freedom and imagination, during her “folkloristic phase”.

Like Nadežda, albeit from different positions concerning the notions of ethnos and identity, Zora also “denied the possibility of a *prettified other like a perfected image of oneself*, thus violating the aestheticized, the civilizational, and *class* distance between a citizen and his/her folk or peasant origin.” (MERENIK 2005: 56). Contrary to the equality of folklorism as identity and modernism established by Nadežda Petrović, Zora Petrović violated such a balance. She focused on the expression of a colouristic, impulsive, energetic form and contour, on elements of the modern picture. She left the issues of the national identity and authentic folklorism in the background and offered a surrogate – costuming. Similar to Nadežda, her highest aim was to attain modernism in her pictures.

Although Nadežda Petrović was the first among the Serbian painters of the 20th century to do so, Zora Petrović, following in her footsteps, created art that, in pictorial and narrative terms, stood outside the historical epic discourse or the occasional romanticising of folklore, art that was purposefully indelicate, sometimes even “ugly”. In Nadežda’s time, neither fine arts criticism nor the audience understood or showed any consideration for that multi-layered narrative, which began with Valtrović, Krstić, and Milovanović who depicted the beauty of the undiscovered periphery on the edges of the Principality of Serbia bordering the Ottoman Empire. This narrative was continued, first in Nadežda’s work, and

¹¹ When Communist Party’s arbitration in art was near its end.

culminated in Zora's opus through a violation of the norms of the ideal and beautiful. Finally, through a demystification of any adorned or prettified ethnos or "ethnicity", Nadežda realised her own ideological and modernist turnabout – a hitherto unseen image of Serbia as "the internal otherness" of Europe. Zora Petrović went furthest by producing a costumed "melting pot". In favour of the modernist discourse, at the time of socialist realism and post-socialist realism of the 1950s, she "played with dolls", surrogates, and the irony of "ethnicity" in an entirely different political-ideological era on timeline.

Last but not least, it can be concluded that both paintresses, although starting from different ideological points, attained their modernism as an ultimate goal, through an important transitional phase in which the national folk costume was a capital subject matter.

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ЛОКАЛНИ, ЕТНОГРАФСКИ, ОРИЈЕНТАЛНИ МОТИВ ИЛИ ДЕТАЉ У
НАРОДНИМ ПОРТРЕТИМА НАДЕЖДЕ ПЕТРОВИЋ И ЗОРЕ ПЕТРОВИЋ

Резиме

Процес откривања непознатих, неистражених или „скривених” споменика, сакралних објеката или етнографског материјала народа са периферије и пограничних подручја Србије добија замањак у XIX веку, после ослобођења од окупације Османског царства. Међу

истраживачима пионирима какав је био Михаило Валтровић, најутицајнији је био сликар Ђорђе Крстић. Оно што је Крстић представљао као мистичну лепоту неоткривене периферије, Надежда Петровић (1873–1915), као његова верна ученица, поставила је у период 1903–1910. као тематско и идејно тежиште свог сликарства. У том периоду тражила је модернистичку интерпретацију Крстићевог откривеног етнографског и народног, националног материјала. Њен поглед је првенствено био усмерен на дубоку периферију Србије. Сцене и портрети које слика могле су се посматрати као домаћи „оријентализам”, урбана перцепција неоткривеног руралног света. Оријентализам, популаран и познат у центрима у којима су студирале Надежда (Минхен) и Зора (Будимпешта), могао је, делимично, да утиче на ове две сликарке. То се посебно односи на Надежду, која открива свет који је постојао на далеким границама Османског царства. Надежда, понекад и млађа Зора Петровић, инсистира на посебностима локалног и националног. Међутим, она је нужно обележена елементима оријенталног. Тако, између осталог, стварају посебан самостални, домаћи (некакав облик) оријентализам у детаљима „утканог” у српске ношње из различитих крајева Србије. Њихово интересовање и утицај локалног, периферног окружења уграђени су како у садржај тако и у модернистички концепт слике.

После Надеждине смрти, само се Зора Петровић (1894–1962) може видети као права настављачица њеног жестоког, изражајног сликарства неукрашеног и неулепшаног народа и сељана. Ипак, Зорине „ношње” су сликане у Београду. У послератном периоду често је маскирала своје моделе у народне ношње или је као моделе користила сеоске жене са оближњих пијаца. За разлику од Надежде, Зора није водила рачуна о идеолошкој и националнополитичкој компоненти која је за Надежду била од великог значаја. Она је у модернистички концепт послератног израза увела искључиви утицај „другости”, интерполације „старог”, руралног, оријенталног, у ново значење и смисао модерне слике.

На крају, можемо закључити да су, иако полазећи са различитих идеолошких тачака, обе сликарке свој модернизам као крајњи циљ уметничког деловања достигле кроз важну транзициону етапу у којој је народна ношња била капитална тема.

Кључне речи: Надежда Петровић, Зора Петровић, модернизам, национално, оријентално.