

MESTROVIC'S NATIONALITY

There has been much confusion even in Europe about the origin and nationality of Ivan Mestrovic. He has been mentioned as an "Austrian", a "Dalmatian", a "Serbian", a "Slavonian", a "Croatian" and a "Yugoslav" artist. His name has often been connected, and his art interpreted in a too exclusive nationalistic way.

Mestrovic was born and grew up in Dalmatia (the other name for old Croatia), which is a province of Yugoslavia and which was formerly a part of Austria.

Mestrovic's parents were Croatian peasants, and Mestrovic counts himself therefore amongst the Croatian or western portion of the Yugoslav nation, and not amongst the Serbian or eastern portion. He is a Catholic and not an Orthodox.

It is then proper to call him "Yugoslav", or if one wants to make a finer racial distinction to call him "Croat".

SOME EUROPEAN OPINIONS OF MESTROVIC'S ART

In sculpture an artist must have a message if he is to be known to his generation. He must also have unusual resolution and initiative on account of practical disadvantages of intractable and costly material and the scarcity of commissions..... So under modern conditions, there are few sculptors with reputations, and the advent of a new genius is a matter of real importance to Europe, and calls for exceptional honors".

James Bone, Director of the Modern Art Gallery of the British Museum.

THE GREAT PHENOMENON

"I well remember the day, in Rome, 1911, when I saw his works for the first time. I felt in the presence of a great spirit....
~~XXXXXXXXXXXX~~ Certainly those who have seen these collections can form some idea of the almost godlike grandeur of the work."

Sir John Lavery.

"A dominating figure in the history of art".

Emile Verhaeren

"Superb ' It is a new revelation ' I will come tomorrow, the day after tomorrow, and I shall return again."

Leonardo Bistolfi

"The greatest sculptor of religious subjects since the Renaissance"

Professor M.E. Sadler, University of Leeds.

I V A N M E S T R O V I C

15-VIII-1883

Ivan Mestrovic was born in 1883, at Vrpolje in Croatia, of peasant parents who returned soon afterwards to their native village, Otavice near Drnis, Dalmatia, where the boy was brought up in close touch with nature and under the strong influence of Croat folk poetry.

While very young his imagination was fired by the guslar chanting of the past, and of the defeat at Kossovo in 1389 and of such heroes as Marko Kraljevic, Milos Obilic and Strahinic Ban. At the same time the young Mestrovic was taught to carve and model by his father who had skill in the building arts; and a vivid early memory is that of a visit to Sibenik where the boy saw a cathedral and the sea for the first time.

After working with a master-mason at Split, Mestrovic went in 1900 to Vienna where, despite many difficulties, he made rapid progress, remaining there (for a time as student at the Academy of Fine Art under Edmund Hellmer and others) with short absence, until 1907.

Vienna had more than one advantage for Mestrovic. It was sufficiently near home for him to keep in touch with his fellow Southern Slav countrymen and their growing national aspirations, it could provide a thorough technical training and it was the centre of a revival in Austrian art to which both German and Slav contributed. One of the chief sources of the new activity was the influence of the architect Otto Wagner (1841-1918) among whose pupils the Slovene Plecnik, has an honored place: and the foundation of the Vienna Seze sion (Vereinigung Bildender Kunstler Osterreichs) in 1897 was a means of drawing wide attention to Austrian architecture, sculpture painting and the crafts, and to the productions of other countries also.

Among the foreign sculptors who exhibited in Vienna Seze sion displays were Meunier, Minne and Rodin, and thus students had opportunities not only of studying work of the past in the collections of the capital but of becoming acquainted with the modern sculpture of western Europe. Rodin, in particular, made a deep impression on the young Mestrovic who, on one occasion, led a body of fellow students to do homage to the French master,

Mestrovic soon passed from such restless experiment as is seen in TIMOR DEI (a huge foot crushing a group of people, which was exhibited at the Seze sion in 1905) to the much more mature FOUNTAIN OF LIFE, and before leaving Vienna he had carved in granite the single figures, ADAM and EVE, and the high-relief group, AT THE SOURCE OF LIFE, a fountain design, in all of which he shared with such other artists as Hanak and Metzner (1870-1919), the good sense and the good taste of the best sculpture then being produced in Austria.

Mestrovic had now exhibited at Belgrade, Dresden, London (in the Dalmatian Pavilion of the Austrian Exhibition at Earl's Court in 1906), Munich, Prague, Sofia, Venice and Zagreb, in addition to Vienna.

In 1908 the sculptor modelled at Otavice a head of his mother, made at Split the seated figure of her in peasant dress, and then, with memories of home, went to Paris. In that cosmopolitan centre he did not, like many others, experiment in the fashionable style of the moment but, adding to his knowledge of ancient art and making a short visit to London to see sculpture at the British Museum, he concentrated his gifts, in the full energy of youth, on a project which had been slowly forming in his mind since boyhood. He had conceived a vast building, a national shrine which he named the

the TEMPLE OF KOSSOVO, the defeat of 1389 being its central theme. During 1908-9 he modelled a number of heroic figures for this imagined building and if, in their emotional range, there is kinship with Rodin's power, in their massive strength there is affinity with the art of Maillol, though the latter's harmonies are not those of the young Slav. Bourdelle (1861-1929) whose large figures have been compared with those by Mestrovic is in a different category: this French sculptor was at his best in portraiture and work on a small scale. In heroic work he seems uneasy and incoherent. Mestrovic, indeed, had little to learn from modern French art for he came to Paris fully equipped as a sculptor and he had developed that understanding of the relation of sculpture to architecture which was more alert in central Europe than it was in France.

After shewing some of his new work in Paris, Vienna and elsewhere, Mestrovic assembled the Kossovo fragments at Zagreb for two important displays in 1910 and 1911 and the sculptures were transferred in the latter year to the Pavilion of the Kingdom of Serbia (designed by Bajalovic of Belgrade) at the International Art Exhibition, Rome. Mestrovic was there revealed to the world as a master. Not only did he himself exhibit over seventy sculptures and some drawings, but he had inspired the sculptors Bodrozic, Penic and Rosandic and the painters Babic, Krizman and Racki worthily to support him in the Kossovo series; in addition, there was brought together a varied collection of work by other artists, the whole expressing the national consciousness of the Southern Slav people among whom the inhabitants of Serbia and Montenegro alone were at that time free. The vision and the energy of Mestrovic dominated the Pavilion and gave to its contents the urgency of prophecy.

The Serbian victories of 1912 and 1913 inspired THE VICTOR and a medal to commemorate the avenging of Kossovo at Kumanovo. Also in 1913, were carved, in plaster, the reliefs VIRGIN AND CHILD WITH SAINT JOHN, THE ANNUNCIATION and CHRIST AND THE WOMAN OF SAMARIA and, in wood, the first DEPOSITION.

Mestrovic had for some time been working out designs for the TEMPLE OF KOSSOVO itself and a model in wood was ready for the International Art Exhibition at Venice in 1914. This model shews a building planned not only to contain sculpture and wall painting but so constructed that sculpture is an essential part of its exterior also, the building of the tower with winged figures being an original and impressive feature. In his design, Mestrovic shares with such an architect as Plecnik a distinctive quality of subtle construction rarely found in the modern architecture of western Europe.

In considering Mestrovic's TEMPLE OF KOSSOVO, one cannot help thinking of the impressive Volkerschlachtendenkmal at Leipzig which, commenced in 1898, was completed in 1913, and is specially notable for Metzner's sculpture so well related to the architecture by Schmitz. Both Mestrovic and Metzner create heroic figures, Metzner's being the more tragic, for over his warriors and women broods the stillness of death. In Mestrovic's fighters and widows a sense of life persists and thus the TEMPLE OF KOSSOVO, although never built, remains a memorial to the unconquerable faith of man.

The representative Mestrovic Exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum, South Kensington, London, in 1915, brought new life to London art circles. It is true that the Dalmatian artist had been very enthusiastically introduced by Mr. James Bone in the pages of the Manchester Guardian (June 10, 1911) at the time of the Rome Exhibition, but, speaking generally, there was little knowledge of recent developments in sculpture abroad, though the revival associated with the names of such workers in England as Epstein, Gaudier-Brzeska (1891-1915) and Eric Gill was beginning to make students more curious.

The unusual work of Mestrovic (which included the model of the building and many fragments of the TEMPLE OF KOSSOVO, some important reliefs of religious subjects, portraits and the superb CARYATID IN WOOD) came as a revelation. A stimulating conflict of opinion resulted and the foundation of a wide appreciation of Mestrovic's art in the British Isles was laid. At the end of the Exhibition the marble torso, STRAHINIC BAN, was given to the nation by the Serbian Government on the generous initiative of the sculptor himself and placed in the permanent collection at the Museum.

As the tragedy of the War deepened, Mestrovic felt the need to add to his religious works and among the most important additions were several carvings in wood made at Geneva and Cannes in 1916 and 1917. Some of these were seen at the Exhibition of Serbo-Croat Art at the Grafton Galleries, London, in the winter of 1917-8, among them the great CHRIST ON THE CROSS and the relief DEPOSITION which was acquired by the Ivan Mestrovic Purchase Fund in 1919 and given to the National Gallery Millbank for the Modern Foreign Section.

During the period of the War, work by Mestrovic was shown at Bradford, Edinburgh, Glasgow and Leeds in addition to London. In 1919 it was seen in Paris (Exposition des Artistes Yougoslaves), Brighton (Serbian Exhibition), London (Twenty-one Gallery, Adelphy), and Rotterdam; and in 1920 at Amsterdam and Antwerp.

In 1919 Mestrovic eagerly accepted a commission for a Mortuary Chapel to the Racic family and began designs for it in London. The building was completed in 1922 on an ideal hill-top site overlooking the sea at Cavtat (Ragusa Veechia) in Dalmatia. Mestrovic was both architect and sculptor of this chapel, one of the most beautiful religious buildings erected in Europe since the War. In it, construction and decoration grow naturally together, it is admirably suited to its surroundings and, while it reveals the talent of an independent modern artist, its style is sufficiently rooted in tradition to make it exist as a natural growth from the art of the past.

The plan is an octagon on which is superimposed a cross, the projecting ends of which form the porch and three small chapels. Strictly appropriate as it is without, its structure seems to flower within to give more intimate expression to its purpose. The four sculptured figures of ascending angels (each holding a child to symbolise the soul of the dead) who look up to the dome, which is decorated with the heads of angels, are particularly happy inventions; but every detail, from the relief of the Deposition to the relief of the four members of the Racic family, and from the figure of the crucified Christ to the figure of Saint Roche, repays study.

In July 1924 a varied display of sculpture by Mestrovic was held at the Fine Art Society's Galleries, New Bond Street, London, the wood carvings and portraits, specially, awaking renewed interest. Many of the exhibits, with others, were sent to the United States in the same year to be shewn for the first time in New York and other places, the sculptor receiving later an important commission from Chicago. It was originally intended that two large equestrian figures, one of a cowboy and the other of an Indian, should be made but the idea was modified and two mounted North American Indians were eventually modelled and cast in bronze in Yugoslavia. These statues, acquired through the Ferguson Fund, were erected in Grant Park on the shore of Lake Michigan and were unveiled in 1928. In these two mounted figures, Mestrovic's virile art does homage to a race in which the sculptor himself states that he found characteristics akin to those of his own people.

In 1929 examples of Mestrovic's sculpture were seen at the Barcelona Exhibition and in 1930, for the second time, a number of works were exhibited in a national gallery in London, a representative collection of modern Yugoslav art being shewn at the National Gallery, Millbank, a selection being sent subsequently to Leeds, Bradford, Swansea, Belfast, Birmingham and Manchester, and a final exhibition being held at the Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, in the summer of 1931.

Portraiture forms an important part of Mestrovic's art. In addition to making convincing representations of heroes of the past he works from life with deep insight into personality. His large portrait of Rodin is as arresting as the well known bust of Anatole France by Bourdelle, and his SIR THOMAS BEECHAM, Mr. GEORGE EUMORFO POULOS, and Mr. ERIC MACLAGAN are three excellent likenesses among a large company which includes King Alexander of Yugoslavia, President Masaryk of Czechoslovakia and King Faisal of Iraq.

Further evidence of the sculptor's wide range is found in the series (in marble, bronze, and wood) of figures playing musical instruments and in such marble studies of womanhood as the two entitled CONTEMPLATION (Fine Art Society Exhibition Catalogue No. 15 and National Gallery, Millbank, Yugoslav Exhibition Catalogue No. 72c). From other miscellaneous work the small marble relief, DANCER, with bowed head and huge limbs, and the relief, AMOR AND PSYCHE, may be named as shewing, at white heat, a daemonic quality which, first evident in Mestrovic's student work at Vienna, has ever remained conspicuous in his sculpture.

Mestrovic is expert in both carving and modelling. His reliefs and figures in wood alone place him in the front rank of direct carvers. In addition, it is sufficient to draw attention to such pieces as the two female heads, one in black stone and one in light brown stone, shewn at the Victoria And Albert Museum in 1915, to prove his skill in the carving of very hard material. He is almost invariably successful in preserving the essential quality of molten metal cooled into shape in his bronzes, SHEPHERD BOY and WOMAN WITH OUT ARMS being good examples: while it may be suggested that the subtlety of expression in both CONTEMPLATION figures is largely

largely the result of the combination of modelling and carving which went to the making of these sculptures in white marble, a hard material which yet, to some extent, possesses the illusion of softness.

Jugoslavia has been well served on her own soil by Mestrovic and, in addition to the Racic Chapel at Cavtat, the following works may be noted:- THE VICTOR and the memorial to France at Belgrade; the memorial to King Peter at Dubrovnik; the colossal figure of Bishop Gregory of Nin in the peristyle of Diocletian's Palace, and the monuments to the poets Botic and Marulic at Split; and BISHOP Strossmayer and THE FOUNTAIN OF LIFE at Zagreb.

As regards the appreciation of Mestrovic in the British Isles, it is probably correct to say that no other living foreign sculptor is represented in so many public and private collections in this country. The National Gallery, Millbank, London possesses DEPOSITION (wood); SIR THOMAS BEECHAM (bronze), SELF-PORTRAIT (plaster) and GIRL WITH A GUITAR (black marble). The Victoria and Albert Museum, South Kensington, London, possesses Strahinic Ban (white marble). At the Imperial War Museum, London, and at the National Gallery of Scotland, Princes Street, Edinburgh, are portrait busts of Dr. Elsie Inglis of the Scottish Women's Hospitals. The British Museum has, in its Print Room, a copy of the Portfolio of Lithographs published at Zagreb in 1923. The City of Belfast Art Gallery owns a bust of Sir John Lavery and the Irish Free State has a design which Mestrovic submitted in connection with the new coinage issued in 1928.

The Canadian War Memorial Collection at Ottawa contains a relief THE CANADIAN PHALANX: 1914-1918 and Toronto Art Gallery possesses MY MOTHER AT PRAYER, in marble

Mestrovic is an Honorary Member of the Royal Scottish Academy

The two following short extracts from an article by Mestrovic on Michelangelo, which appeared in translation in The Slavonic Review (London) for December 1926, may help students to gain an idea of the sculptor's own attitude to his art.

He who really understands art cannot maintain that Phidias had surpassed the Egyptians or Greek art about the end of the fifth century. This much is certain, that he had brought the form of the human body to a degree of perfection such as no one before him, so far as we know, had equalled and such as hardly anyone has equalled since. The Egyptians took from the mountain, from its very stone, a divinity cast in the image of man: while the Greeks of the fourth century deprived God of His mysterious veil, and transformed Him into human likeness.

If too Michelangelo did not attain to the perfection of Phidias in the matter of form or to the sovereign calm of the Greeks, he surpassed them in temperament, in zest of life, in musical feeling.

Ernest H. R. Collings

London, June 1931.