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## **Ivana Kobilca and Her Painting for the Ljubljana Town Hall, Slovenia Bows to Ljubljana, in the Context of Women's Painting in the Late Nineteenth Century**

Izvorni znanstveni rad – *Original scientific paper*

Predan 15. 4. 2013. – Prihvačen 3. 10. 2013.

UDK: 75 Kobilca, I.

### *Summary*

*This article on the artist Ivana Kobilca (b. Ljubljana, 1861; d. Ljubljana, 1926) developed from thinking about her painting Slovenija se klanja Ljubljani (Slovenia Bows to Ljubljana), which has hung in the main chamber of Ljubljana's Town Hall for over a hundred years. The first negotiations about the painting took place in 1898, after Kobilca completed a portrait of the Croatian bishop, arts patron, and famous Slavophile, Josip Juraj Strossmayer, for the city of Ljubljana, which then decided to finance as well a large allegorical painting for the Town Hall assembly room.*

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*and their professionalization in the art field in that period. As a large and important public commission it tells us of women's serious entry into the painting profession and of the province of Carniola's willingness to accept Kobilca. In the article, however, we mainly address certain less favourable aspects connected with the painting. Indeed, on the whole it was not a successful work, a fact we take as a starting point for thinking about where women's artistic careers ran into obstacles and how they were unable to receive the proper training for painting this sort of monumental multifigural composition.*

**Keywords:** *Ivana Kobilca, women's painting in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, reception and historicization of Ivana Kobilca, limited educational opportunities for women painters, professional organizing of women artists*

### **Introduction**

The present article on the artist Ivana Kobilca (b. Ljubljana, 1861; d. Ljubljana, 1926) developed from thinking about her painting *Slovenija se klanja Ljubljani (Slovenia Bows to Ljubljana)*, which has hung in the main chamber of Ljubljana's Town Hall for over a hundred years.<sup>1</sup> The first negotiations about the painting took place in 1898, after Kobilca completed a portrait of the Croatian bishop, arts patron, and famous Slavophile, Josip Juraj Strossmayer, for the city of Ljubljana, which then decided to finance as well a large allegorical painting for the Town Hall assembly room. The finished painting was installed in the chamber in 1903, after it was brought from Sarajevo, where the artist was living at the time.

The work is of exceptional interest as it provides a basis for actively confronting some of the key questions related to women's emancipation and their professionalization in the art field in that period. As a large and important public commission it tells us of women's serious entry into the painting profession and of how willingly the province of Carniola accepted Kobilca and, at least in her case, did not succumb to discriminatory prejudices. The selection of a woman to provide decoration for the important buildings in a city was,

in fact, extremely rare: awarding large public commissions to women artists was hardly the rule in Europe at the time.

In this article, however, we will mainly address some of the less favourable aspects connected with the painting. Indeed, on the whole it was not a successful work, a fact we will take as a starting point for thinking about where women's artistic careers ran into obstacles and how they were unable to receive the proper training for painting this sort of monumental multifigural composition. In this light, in the first section of the article, we will discuss first of all the education of female painters: even well into the twentieth century, art education was, in some places, designed in a way that explicitly discriminated against women. Next, we will look at some of the general "traps", as it were, that existed in connection with the realization of women's emancipation itself and that damaged and, indeed, destroyed many a woman's potential professional career. We will end this first section on a more positive note, with a discussion of the beginnings of the professional organizing of women artists, which among other things developed as an active response to these problems.

The second section of the article is devoted to the reception of the painting, and its painter, from its initial unveiling to

today. Among other things, we will be interested in why Kobilca's image has been deteriorating and calcifying into a stereotype of unrealized and artistically weak femininity.

### 1.1 Ivana Kobilca in the Context of Women's Limited Educational Opportunities

We see a combination of positive and negative factors in the education of women painters in the nineteenth century; in certain fields of painting this combination proved more favourable, while in others it was much less so. There were, indeed, many external reasons behind the "female inclination" for portraits and still lifes, one of the most important of which, certainly, was the discriminatory educational system that allowed girls to pursue such artistic interests but in no way supported their becoming painters of monumental works. The notion of women establishing themselves as monumental painters was ideologically quite inconceivable for the nineteenth century, as it in no way corresponded to the standard image of middle-class femininity. The well-off nineteenth-century middle class, from which most female painters were recruited, had, in particular, removed women from their former active involvement in the family's business activities and livelihood and confined them to the closed circle of private life, to unpaid work and caring for the family. The range of professional activities that were considered suitable for women of this class thus became very limited. If women so often studied painting and if, at least in relative terms, this was so easily permitted, it was presumably because painting occupied a kind of border area, between a hobby, which was quite appropriate for a young lady, and a profession, which was probably not a girl's original aim. In addition, we should not forget that in the nineteenth century, large public and church commissions were a critical source of income for artists and provided them with some of their better-paid (if not best-paid) jobs. The notion that these commissions had to remain the domain of men, as the ones who supported their families, would have probably seemed beyond dispute.

Very few factors supported a woman artist who was interested in making monumental historical or allegorical paintings or, indeed, any demanding multifigural compositions. Certainly, we see a favourable influence in the continual spread of such cultural institutions as public galleries and museums, where women could educate themselves not only by looking at older monumental works but also by copying them, which was an important part of preparing for one's own work. But even here there were sometimes limitations on women, when institutions simply fell back on already established discriminatory practices. For example, because it was now usual for artists to have an academic training, certain Italian galleries simply resorted to the requirement that copyists present proof of the kind of academic education or study that was inaccessible to women.<sup>2</sup> But such procedures, in fact, seem to have been uncommon, and we know that Kobilca herself, at the beginning of her training, did a great deal of copying in galleries.

For the most part, however, barriers were erected that prevented women from entering the more demanding field

of multifigural monumental painting. As for educational opportunities, women were from the start on an entirely unequal footing to men: they were not allowed to attend official educational programmes, which often were the only ones that provided the serious basic preparation and, later, the specialized training needed for painting such works. Private schools for women did not offer such programmes, while the moralistic constraint that prevented these schools from giving any instruction at all in drawing and painting from the naked figure was another major obstacle. Because anatomical study from the naked figure was basic to learning about multifigural composition, women were excluded a priori from monumental painting. Linda Nochlin is probably right when she says that prohibiting such classes at women's art academies was more or less like prohibiting medical students from dissecting, or indeed not allowing them to even study the human body.<sup>3</sup>

The works and documents Kobilca left behind, in fact, tell us a great deal about how girls in the 1880s who did not wish to renounce more ambitious multifigural work found ways to educate themselves. Among other things, they studied drawing from live models on their own, and a few private schools, too, were already allowing such classes. Kobilca has left us a handful of nudes; for some of her nudes, eyewitness accounts have survived; also, photographs of naked models have been preserved. In the recollections recorded by Stanko Vurnik, Kobilca recalls, among other things, that in Bavaria, while she was studying painting at Erdtelt's school, she also attended life-drawing classes given by "the sculptor Roth". But she also remembers that later, in Paris, when her fellow female students at Henri Gervex's school heard about such immorality, they turned their noses up at her: »And there was that horrible moralism which Gervex's English girls and their governesses made such a fuss about! When I told them that in Professor Roth's class in Munich we had painted from naked models, and even from naked men, they all suddenly pointed their noses in the air and started to look down me. At Gervex's they never painted from nude models, and this from moral considerations alone.«<sup>4</sup>

Based on Kobilca's example, then, we can say that the kind of instruction in anatomical drawing she received was hardly standard or acceptable for women, nor was it regularly incorporated in their education. It was conditioned by local customs and moral views and also depended very much on the student's own persistence and will to learn. Understandably, however, such supplementary instruction was no substitute for several years of training in multifigural composition.

If an artist wanted to develop fully and successfully into a first-rate monumental painter, there were, in the final phase of his education, various stipends available for extended travel abroad and the like; along with a good performance in competitions, such stipends often brought candidates a great deal of marketable public attention. Women, however, were not usually eligible for these stipends. We can imagine that it was also very difficult for them to win an apprenticeship with an established master – which was important for a young artist not only as work experience but also as a



Ivana Kobilca, *Slovenia Bows to Ljubljana*, 1903, oil on canvas, 146 x 262 cm, Ljubljana Town Hall, Main Council Chamber (EG0002853, Documentation, Museum and Galleries of Ljubljana, photograph: Matevž Paternoster)

Ivana Kobilca, *Slovenija se klanja Ljubljani*, 1903., ulje na platnu, 146 x 262 cm, Velika dvorana Gradske vijećnice u Ljubljani (Ljubljanska mestna hiša), (EG0002853, Dokumentacija MGML)

reference. Because these masters were often professors at the art academy, they usually gave the assistantships to their successful students.

Under such conditions, it is understandable that women did not exactly flock to the field of large public and church commissions. Their involvement in this area was often more a matter of chance or special circumstances in which – as in Carniola – there were no distinctly better male candidates interested in the job.<sup>5</sup> Although women's monumental painting in this period has not been well researched, it nevertheless seems that Kobilca, with her truly frequent and persistent efforts in applying for such commissions, and then actually winning several of them, was hardly typical. She seems to have been conscious of her own limitations in this field, which only increased her usual worry about whether she could meet the challenges of a certain work and whether it would be well received. And she was also well acquainted with the physical toll involved in monumental works; for instance, while painting the frescos for the Jesuit church in Sarajevo, she came down with an almost fatal case of pneumonia. Her great desire and persistence, however, drove her forward, and from her letters to her family we can conclude that, had her proposals and applications all been successful, she would have completed many more such works. We find evidence of Kobilca's interest in monumental painting quite early. In Paris at the start of the 1890s, for example, she was enthusiastic about the art of her acquaintance Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, then probably the most renowned French painter of monumental works. Also, in an undated letter

to her sister Marija from the same period, we read that she was practising painting decorative things because she would get so much pleasure from making large works for churches and palaces.<sup>6</sup>

If we now turn back to the painting *Slovenia Bows to Ljubljana*, made for the Ljubljana Town Hall, where do we find the mistakes? Given what has been said so far, we find them where we would expect them.

Kobilca had great problems with the composition; she was simply not adept at juxtaposing such a large number of people, as well as many other different objects, in a single picture. The joining of different planes often ends in unpleasant collisions and incongruities. Things that are “too big” converge with things that are “too small”; poorly resolved proportions caused her obvious difficulties when transferring individual segments, figures, or groups into a painting made in the naturalist manner. The problem with this way of working – used generally by the naturalist-oriented “*Juste Milieu*” masters – was that paintings were normally composed from a number of different photographs; consequently, the integration of the parts into the whole was seldom perfect. Experienced masters are said to have invested great effort in making sure all elements were arranged as precisely as possible when the photographs were being taken, but discrepancies still appeared regularly in their works.<sup>7</sup> We should also remember that mistakes in this kind of “hyper-realistic” painting are easier to see and more distinct than in other painting styles. Paradoxically, the great pains a painter takes in making the





Ivana Kobilca (?), *Female Nude*, photograph, National Gallery of Slovenia, inv. no. NG D 490 – 1, National Gallery of Slovenia, Ljubljana  
Ivana Kobilca (?), *Ženski akt*, fotografija, Narodna galerija, inv. br. NG D 490 – 1, Narodna galerija, Ljubljana

parts match up as closely as possible often result in him making mistakes in the whole. As we have said, Kobilca was not at all adept at such procedures, and her figures, which look as if they have been pasted together, effectively impede a sense of spatial depth. As a result, everything feels quite crowded.

We can say that the picture as a whole barely survives. But if we divide it up and look at its separate parts, we find it has many excellent sections. The individual figures, the children carrying shields, the hay cart, the plants and the crops are, as a rule, superbly executed, convincing, and virtuoso accomplishments – only they do not match up. This does not mean, of course, that Kobilca was a poor painter. The painting itself is a good illustration of the fact that she was excellent in the things she had been trained for, but not quite as good with other things.

In Kobilca's defence we should point out that, in the basic concept and composition of the painting she was limited by the suggestions of her clients, which were not especially to her liking. At the same time, however, it needs to be said that such constraints were standard practice for this kind of work and a good monumental painter knew how to negotiate them. In the end, it seems, Kobilca accepted a compromise



Ivana Kobilca (?), *Female Nude*, photograph, National Gallery of Slovenia, inv. no. NG D 490 – 2, National Gallery of Slovenia, Ljubljana  
Ivana Kobilca (?), *Ženski akt*, fotografija, Narodna galerija, inv. br. NG D 490 – 2, Narodna galerija, Ljubljana

in which she interwove her own ideas about organizing the pictorial narrative with the elements desired by Ljubljana's Mayor Ivan Hribar and Bishop Strossmayer.<sup>8</sup>

## 1.2 Ivana Kobilca in the Context of the Difficulties of Women's Emancipation

The next topic we will consider are the difficulties connected with the realization of women's emancipation itself, which entailed many undesired consequences that effectively oppressed and even ruined many a woman's professional career. Here we will turn for help to a rather unusual book.

In 2007, a kind of novelistic diary with an appendix of letters, written by Kobilca's good friend and occasional housemate Rosa Pfäffinger, was published under the title *Die Pariser Bohème (1889–1895): Ein autobiographischer Bericht der Malerin Rosa Pfäffinger (The Parisian Bohemia / 1889–1895: An Autobiographical Account by the Painter Rosa Pfäffinger)*.<sup>9</sup> Kobilca appears in the book in one of the central roles; she can also be seen on the cover with three other friends. Pfäffinger's account presents Kobilca in a light in which we have never seen her before – more as a *fin-de-siècle* Bohemian.

The story of the book, which in fact is rather complicated, we will summarize in telegraphic style. It begins with a circle of friends – young women studying painting in Munich all twenty years of age or a little older. One of them, Maria Slavona, returns to her native Lübeck and there meets a handsome and multi-skilled artist: the *fin-de-siècle* decadent and, above all, swindler, Willy Gretor. He lures her to Paris – at the expense of the book's author, Rosa Pfäffinger, who had recently become a wealthy heiress and, from a mix of kind-heartedness and socialist ideas, had decided to use her inheritance to support her financially less secure friends. In Paris, Slavona becomes Gretor's lover and gets pregnant. Fearing the loss of such fine economic support, Gretor goes to Munich to see Pfäffinger. She too becomes



Ivana Kobilca (?), *Motif for the painting "Slovenia Bows to Ljubljana" (girl with wreath)*, photograph, private holdings

*Ivana Kobilca* (?), Motiv za sliku »Slovenija se klanja Ljubljani« (djevojka s vijencem), fotografija, privatno vlasništvo



Ivana Kobilca (?), *Motif for the painting "Slovenia Bows to Ljubljana" (kneeling man)*, photograph, private holdings

*Ivana Kobilca* (?), Motiv za sliku »Slovenija se klanja Ljubljani« (klečeći muškarac), fotografija, privatno vlasništvo

his lover and moves to Paris, where she too soon gives birth to Gretor's child.

In Paris, with Pfäffinger paying all the bills, a remarkable community is formed, a kind of commune, where Gretor's women, the two children, and other artists all live in a large shared apartment. Pfäffinger also pays for separate studios for some of them. Gretor himself has his own separate quarters, coming and going from the common apartment as he pleases. Pfäffinger also finances the apartment and rich lifestyle of Gretor's "main" mistresses, initially the then very popular Italian singer Severina and, after her, the no less acclaimed dancer Polaire. Gretor also supports many other artists on Pfäffinger's money, including, for instance, August Strindberg. In the early 1890s, already recognizing their greatness, Gretor also begins to buy a large number of works by Gauguin, Van Gogh, and Cézanne.<sup>10</sup> And so it goes until it reaches the point when this sort of communal living becomes unbearable and, most importantly, the fabulous inheritance runs out. Somewhere around this time the story also becomes less interesting for us, as Ivana Kobilca (who appears in the book under the name Wera Slowenk) breaks off her ties with this extraordinary circle of people for an extended length of time.

When we ask ourselves in amazement why and how Kobilca ended up in this bizarre diary – she is, after all, one of the main characters, perhaps the fifth or sixth central figure in the book and fourth "in rank" among Gretor's lovers – we can say only that, as a rule, the things we already know about the Slovene painter are, at least roughly, in line with the diary. Kobilca was, indeed, friends with this circle and studied with them, and she had known Pfäffinger even in Carniola. Consul Pfäffinger's family lived in Trieste and had their own villa in the Carniolan village of Podbrezje, where they spent holidays. Kobilca's family also went to Podbrezje regularly, since her mother was from there. We cannot, and probably will never be able to, confirm some of the personal opinions and intimate entanglements presented in the book. But given the narrator's great and idealizing affection for Gretor, these are probably the things most influenced by Pfäffinger's personal attitudes.

What, then, can this book – which would seem to be little more than a third-rate pulp novel were it not connected to actual events – tell us about the emancipation and professionalization of women artists?

In her introduction to Pfäffinger's account, editor Ulrike Wolff-Thomsen insightfully acquaints the reader with the



Ivana Kobilca (?), *Motif for the painting "Slovenia Bows to Ljubljana"* (man with cart), photograph, private holdings

Ivana Kobilca (?), *Motiv za sliku »Slovenija se klanja Ljubljani«* (muškarac s kolicima), fotografija, privatno vlasništvo



Ivana Kobilca (?), *Motif for the painting "Slovenia Bows to Ljubljana"* (vegetation), photograph, Archive of the Republic of Slovenia AS 1201–117

Ivana Kobilca (?), *Motiv za sliku »Slovenija se klanja Ljubljani«* (raślinje), fotografija, Arhiv Republike Slovenije AS 1201–117

rather complex Bohemian world of these young women from wealthy families. In doing so, she underscores a particular aspect of women's emancipation, namely, the fact that young emancipated women – in this case, painters – had trouble not only with getting an education and working in their profession, but also with emancipation itself: they had simply not mastered their new positions of independence. After a traditionalist upbringing, which prepared them only for the role of mother, with the expectation that their husbands would take care of them in every way, many young women, arriving at freedom, found its burden too heavy. Incapable of earning a living and with children born out of wedlock, like Rosa Pfäffinger and Maria Slavona, they often found themselves living on the edge of survival and completely alone. It was not unusual for their freedom to end in psychological problems, nervous breakdowns, and even suicide. They were also – as in the case we are describing – extremely susceptible to men who were ready to exploit their situation. In this respect they faced complications that are barely imaginable today. For example, there was a unique side effect to the fact that it was normally only wealthy girls who studied art (among other things, women's tuitions were frequently much higher than men's). Their male painting colleagues often married them out of sheer self-interest,<sup>11</sup> and what is more, they were literally the calculated prey of numerous fortune hunters, whose only aim was to separate them from their inheritance as soon as possible.

Wolff-Thomsen thinks that, given these circumstances, we should not view even the kind of remarkable relationships as, for instance, the community we have described as simply a product of modernity and Bohemianism, or even a kind of immature capriciousness. They were at least as much the product of the need for economic survival – communal living was cheaper and could withstand an individual's temporary loss of income – as well as the need for security and the kind of human attachments artists lacked because their way of life was unacceptable to their families.

Kobilca, it seems, frequently organized her private and social life within the framework of such painters' communities; for instance, she became involved in several group economic projects within the framework of the Sarajevo Painters' Club.<sup>12</sup> Such communities, at least in her youth, must have also provided a certain financial relief for her. For example, since Paris was such an extremely expensive city, Kobilca might well have seen the community described above as the only way for her to stay in the French capital for an extended period. We should note, too, that after the community broke up, the single mothers Slavona and Pfäffinger remained closely connected for some time; in a shared household they could more easily care for their children and withstand poverty and everyday anxieties.

### 1.3 Ivana Kobilca in the Context of the Professional Organizing of Women Artists

A more optimistic example of women joining forces – to which we will now turn – can be seen in the creation of professional associations for women artists in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Such efforts, which developed intensively in various parts of Europe, were also, at least indirectly, an active response to many of the problems we have described. In this regard, the *Künstlerinnen-Verein München* (Association of Women Artists of Munich) is of particular interest to us, in that it was one of the chief associations of this kind for Austrian artists as well. Ivana Kobilca was a member for many years, as were her friends Maria Slavona and Marie von Geyses.<sup>13</sup>

From the very start, the Munich association, founded in 1882, was conceived as an explicitly professional group. The women who organized it were, for the most part, professional artists (they included several teachers at schools for applied art), and they had clear ideas about their desires and goals – and about the problems they faced in realizing them.





Ivana Kobilca (?), *Motif for the painting "Slovenija Bows to Ljubljana" (boy)*, photograph, Archive of the Republic of Slovenia AS 1201–122  
 Ivana Kobilca (?), *Motiv za sliku »Slovenija se klanja Ljubljani« (dječak)*, fotografija, Arhiv Republike Slovenije AS 1201–122

Their main goal was to shift women's art activity from the level of applied art, where it was permitted and even well supported (for example, in schools of applied art), to the level of the academy. Here they saw women's dilettantism, then very common, as a great problem, and they wanted, in the short term, to separate themselves from it and, in the long term, to eradicate as much of it as possible.<sup>14</sup> To realize their goals, the association would be able, among other things, to create a high-quality educational programme for women painters, provide them with the best possible social protections, and actively assist them in the development of their professional careers.

Only two years after its founding, in 1884, the association opened its own painting school, the soon-famous Damen-Akademie (Ladies' Academy), which offered women high-quality instruction at a reasonable price. The school eventually received state and local subsidies and even enjoyed royal patronage, which solidified its unique position and international prestige. It became known throughout Europe as a first-rate school, especially for painting. The women artists had extraordinary luck in staffing their school, and some of Bavaria's leading painters taught there. Unfortunately, good staffing also meant a fairly high rotation rate

among professors, as the Damen-Akademie became a kind of springboard for professorships at the state-run "men's" academies. Alongside the school, the association set up what was, essentially, a comprehensive educational support system: since, for example, women were not eligible for state scholarships, they organized their own private system of scholarships.<sup>15</sup> They knew that the most important thing in the battle against dilettantism was a complete and permanent educational programme equal to that of men, for this alone could give women the same level of knowledge and, consequently, the same self-confidence.

Women's art associations across Germany went to extraordinary lengths, too, to create the kind of social system that was essential for active professional women who lived off their work. These efforts led to the establishment of a wide range of rights and privileges, from various forms of support for members, to holiday homes, to actual pension insurance programmes. The Munich association in particular was outstanding in this regard: they created an effective and modern health insurance programme for their members that, among other benefits, could cover costs for up to six weeks of care and treatment in hospital.<sup>16</sup>

The Munich association also tried to help their members and former students in establishing a genuine work practice and performing it successfully. Association organizers had a good understanding of the art system of the day and designed their support to meet its demands. They tried as much as possible to help members exhibit their work, even abroad, for instance, by covering shipping costs for the artworks. And the association itself organized well-publicized competitions.<sup>17</sup> Also, many of its members eventually won leadership positions in mainstream art organizations, where they exerted pressure to ensure the inclusion of women in a wide range of activities.

We know nothing of Kobilca's personal attitudes towards either the group in Paris or the Munich association. About the Paris community, we learn the most from her virtual silence on the subject – judging from her letters, she probably divulged only selected bits of information about it even to family members – and also from the personal crisis that seemed to occur in the period right after her departure from the group. One curious fact that can be connected here is that, upon her death in 1926, Kobilca bequeathed her bank savings book, with a considerable balance registered, to Rosa Pfäffinger.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, Pfäffinger herself, the underwriter of the "commune", after losing all her money never recovered from the events of Paris. Because she was not able even to look after her own son, their friend, the artist Käthe Kollwitz, took him into her care. He grew up with her and her husband alongside their own two sons.

As for the Munich association, we know that Kobilca was a member from 1891 to 1915, and possibly even during the association's first decade, but its records from that period have not survived. We are not yet able to say how much she used its benefits and services, but as a member she was certainly eligible for all the privileges mentioned above. We can assume that she was very familiar with the association





Atelier Färber, Sarajevo (?), Altar painting by Ivana Kobilca, *Christ on the Mount of Olives*, in the Evangelical Church in Sarajevo, photograph, private holdings. (The present condition and location of the altar painting are unknown, and it was very likely destroyed.)

Atelier Färber, Sarajevo (?), Oltarna slika Ivane Kobilce Krist na Maslinskoj gori u Evangeličkoj crkvi u Sarajevu, fotografija, privatno vlasništvo. (Trenutno stanje i lokacija oltarne slike nisu poznati, najvjerojatnije je uništena.)

if only from the fact that at the end of the 1880s several of her closest friends and colleagues from the Erdtelt school attended the Damen-Akademie.

## 2. Ivana Kobilca in the Context of Her Contemporary Reception in Carniola and Her Historicization to the Present Day

We stated in the introduction that the painting *Slovenia Bows to Ljubljana* offers excellent proof of the artist's favourable reception in Carniola (then an Austrian province) and the fact that, at least in her case, the region did not succumb to discriminatory prejudices. From all that has been said, it should already be sufficiently clear just how remarkably rare it was for a woman to be chosen to make a painting for one of the most important chambers in a European city at the end of the nineteenth century. We will, therefore, combine our concluding thoughts with an examination of why Kobilca's compatriots today are not more impressed by this fact or, indeed, why Slovenes have such little enthusiasm in



Ivana Kobilca (?), *Motif for the painting "Christ on the Mount of Olives"*, photograph, Archive of the Republic of Slovenia AS 1201–119  
Ivana Kobilca (?), *Motiv za sliku »Krist na Maslinskoj gori«*, fotografija, Arhiv Republike Slovenije AS 1201–119

general for Kobilca as a serious, astute, and internationally successful artist.

We will begin by noting that during more or less the first fifteen years of her artistic career Kobilca was exceptionally well received in her native Carniola. Her paintings, professional choices, and activities were, as a rule, followed with great approval in the local press and sometimes even with real excitement. Based on the available information, we can say that in her native province the artist had no great difficulty finding work and commissions – which of course does not mean that this happened on its own or without the painter's constant and focused work with clients.

Given such circumstances, Mayor Hribar's selection of a young woman for a large public commission – although still hardly to be expected and therefore most laudable – is easier to understand. The mayor could support his decision not only on the basis of confirmations from abroad about Kobilca's successful work or her many well-known and important paintings, but also on the basis of the young artist's general popularity with his voting base as well as with several important political colleagues, including, for instance, the much-loved Bishop Strossmayer from Croatia. Another factor in Kobilca's favour was

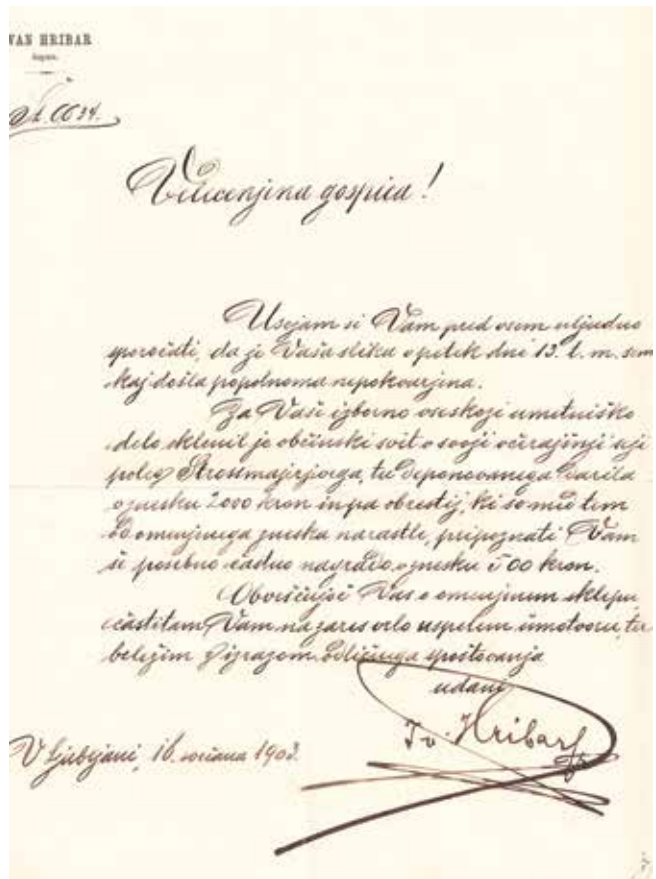


The cover of the book *Die Pariser Bohème (1889–1895): Ein autobiographischer Bericht der Malerin Rosa Pfäffinger*. The photograph on the cover is from the Ivana Kobilca estate. Rosa Pfäffinger stands on the far left; Kobilca, on the far right

Naslovna stranica knjige *Die Pariser Bohème 1889.–1895. Ein autobiographischer Bericht der Malerin Rosa Pfäffinger*. Na naslovnoj stranici je fotografija iz Kobilčine ostavštine. Krajnje lijevo stoji Rosa Pfäffinger, krajnje desno Kobilca

that, at a time when Carniola was strongly divided between its Slovene- and German-defined populations, the mayor, seeking to make Ljubljana a modern Slovene city, wanted to give public commissions to Slovene artists. There was not an especially large number of Slovene painters to choose from, and commissions would sometimes be awarded to younger and inexperienced artists. The rather lacklustre counterpart to Kobilca's painting, on another wall in the Town Hall chamber, had been made a few years earlier by Josip Germ, while the large but compositionally less demanding work *Cesar na konju* (The Emperor on Horseback) was painted by Matej Sternen for the new Municipal Building (Mestni dom) in 1900.<sup>19</sup>

For Slovene painting at the time, Kobilca's *Slovenija Bows to Ljubljana* was a superlative work: this was noted not only by the commissioners of the painting, who awarded Kobilca a bonus payment for her work, but also by the general population, who came in large numbers to view the painting when it was publicly exhibited, and by reporters, who wrote about it in enthusiastic terms. The ecstatic attention Kobilca's painting received from the press had, before that time, only rarely



A letter from Mayor Ivan Hribar to Ivana Kobilca concerning an additional financial award from the municipality and Bishop Strossmayer for her good work on the painting *Slovenija Bows to Ljubljana*; dated 18 February 1903. Private holdings

*Pismo gradonačelnika Ivana Hribara Ivani Kobilci o općinskoj i Strossmayerovoj dodatnoj novčanoj nagradi za dobro izvedenu sliku Slovenija se klanja Ljubljani od 18. 2. 1903. Preslika pisma, privatno vlasništvo*

if ever been accorded a new painting in Carniola.<sup>20</sup> Even so, it was with this work in particular that the Carniolans' love for Kobilca took an abrupt turn.

Not long after 1900, a remarkable change occurred in the province's art world: a group of concerned artists finally appeared who made a more serious effort to establish painting and sculpture within Slovene art. The consciously Slovene segment of Carniola's middle class had by then grown strong enough to provide these young artists with a kind of basic art market, but as this market was still weak, every additional candidate for any sort of commission or sale was unwelcome. In a region where these younger artists, led by Rihard Jakopič, had boldly begun to make a name for themselves by combining modernist styles with a national concept, and even presented themselves as the founders of Slovene art, the internationally recognized Slovene woman painter and exhibitor soon became completely superfluous.

Kobilca's displacement from the pantheon of Slovene art happened gradually and, presumably, without the least premeditation: more and more, the press simply forgot about

her; no-one remembered her for public art purchases and only rarely for group shows, which in any case she herself preferred to avoid; and so on.<sup>21</sup> But these processes in fact began when a newspaper published Rihard Jakopič's truly harsh criticism of Kobilca's Town Hall painting, which he described as poor in quality and outdated. This kind of detailed critique of one artist's work by another artist was a new phenomenon in the Slovene art world. But here again, the critic almost certainly did not intend this as a personal attack on the painter. Jakopič was merely using Kobilca, or rather her work, to more clearly expound his views on painting in general, the poor cultural policy in the region, and the local taste in art. His critique of Kobilca was, essentially, a programmatic text in which Jakopič, offended by the criticism he himself had received after the 2<sup>nd</sup> Slovene Art Exhibition a year or so earlier, sought to explain the production and artistic views of his generation.<sup>22</sup>

After this criticism, Kobilca – who in any case mostly lived abroad – never during her lifetime made a “comeback” in the Slovene press, which, with rare exceptions, wrote hardly a word about her until her death in 1926. The criticism begun by Jakopič, who soon became one of the leading local art authorities, was continued not only by newspaper critics and reporters but also by a docile art history. The same can be said even of France Stele, one of the founders of professional art history in Slovenia, who assigned Kobilca an extremely marginal place in his essay, *Oris zgodovine umetnosti pri Slovencih* (An Outline of the History of Art among the Slovenes), published in the journal *Dom in svet* in 1923. While Stele was the first to give the Jakopič circle of artists – known as the »Slovene impressionists« – significant and very detailed art historical support, he devoted only a few lines to Kobilca. A more favourable view of the artist came only with those art historians who emerged after World War II; in the 1970s, in fact, there were two large exhibitions devoted to Kobilca's work. But even these art historians did not sufficiently dismantle the inappropriate comparisons of Kobilca with her younger colleagues, in which, when measured against some standardized common denominators of “modernity”, she necessarily appears as the weaker artist. They also did not do enough to open up the too narrowly constructed characterization of her as primarily a painter of portraits and floral still lifes.

Since then, not a great deal has developed in the study and presentation of Ivana Kobilca in Slovenia; we do not, for example, have a single good colour monograph on her! The image of Kobilca is thus losing more and more of its “meat”, giving way to an oversimplified, two-dimensional myth.

Again and again there appears, and is gaining ground, the baseless notion that Kobilca is, in fact, rated too highly, and this solely because she is a woman. In this context, strangely enough, writings about the painter may be published, but because they offer nothing substantially new and merely repeat over and over the same distorted characterizations of the artist mentioned above, only with the added spice of juicy anecdotes and events that supposedly happened to her because she was a woman, Kobilca's image as a serious artist is persistently fading and she is seen more and more – quite contrary to the truth – as merely another female artist who, because of her gender, met with a poor reception and never realized her potential. In this context, a truly peculiar paradox has emerged in relation to Kobilca: not only do the general media in Slovenia take this tack with her, but so do the country's otherwise quite active disciplines of feminist art history and theory. These disciplines, too, never deal with Kobilca in a more serious, research-based way, but merely view her as a kind of ready-made material for what are originally foreign models, developed on foreign material by several leading feminist art historians, such as Linda Nochlin and Griselda Pollock. In their discussions of Kobilca, Slovene feminist scholars highlight anything that is even superficially similar to something in foreign articles, whether or not it is so in fact. Kobilca becomes a female painter of traditionally feminine subject matter; she is, characteristically, confined by “spaces of femininity”; the criticism she receives is based on her gender; and so on. Without any real evidence, they conclude that she even resorted to a kind of masculine stance.<sup>23</sup>

This way of stringing together frequently overwrought and untrue “women's stories” and interpretations would not do so much harm if at the same time feminist art history and theory were also able to establish what is essential: to dismantle the burdensome comparison with the younger generation of artists and set Kobilca's successful and impressive career in a clear context – if, in other words, they did not forget to first clearly establish parameters in which comments about her femininity were, for Kobilca, a secondary issue. After all, her real problems were how to create, over months and months, a first-rate painting for an exhibition; how to satisfy her well-heeled portrait sitters; how to make good pictures for the large walls of Sarajevo's new churches or Ljubljana's Town Hall, etc. Precisely because this part is missing, the constant uncritical ruminations on women's topics are literally turning an unconventional, prolific, and courageous female artist into a calcified stereotype of unrealized and artistically weak femininity.

## Notes

1  
I should begin by making it clear that Ivana Kobilca has been very poorly studied. A particular problem is the lack of research on the periods she lived outside of Slovenia, which account for more than thirty of her most active years. Writing about her is thus based primarily on press reports and other sources, as well as

that part of her work which can be found in Slovenia, her recollections in old age, and, above all, her copious legacy, which is in private holdings. The most in-depth and informative book about the painter remains the exhibition catalogue from the 1970s *Ivana Kobilca: 1861–1926*, Ljubljana, 1979.



- 2  
YVETTE DESEYVE, *Der Künstlerinnen-Verein München e. V. und seine Damen-Akademie: Eine Studie zur Ausbildungssituation von Künstlerinnen im späten 19. und frühen 20. Jahrhundert*, Munich, 2005, 117, n. 29. See also *Die bildende Künstlerin: Wertung und Wandel in deutschen Quellentexten 1855–1945*, (ed.) C. Muysers, Amsterdam and Dresden, 1999, 66. We should point out that copying was usually considered acceptable for women.
- 3  
LINDA NOCHLIN, *Zakaj ni bilo velikih umetnic?*, in: *Likovne besede*, nos. 69–70 (2004), 9.
- 4  
STANKO VURNIK, Ivana Kobilca: Spomini, in: *Zbornik za umetnostno zgodovino*, 3, nos. 3–4 (1923), 107. For a general comparison of painting schools in Paris and Munich, see VIKTOR BARANOVSKI – IRINA HLEBNIKOVA, *Pariške zasebne likovne akademije in Ažbetova šola v Münchnu*, Ljubljana, 2006. On the art education of Slovene women artists in the nineteenth century, see LIDIJA TAVČAR, *Odsotnost/prisotnost likovnih ustvarjalcev v leksikonih in enciklopedijah*, Ljubljana, 2006, 15–23.
- 5  
Among the rare cases of successful female monumental painters we should mention Dora Hitz (1856–1924), an acquaintance of Kobilca's. A few years older than the Slovene painter, Hitz was, for instance, the court painter for the Romanian royal family; among other things, she created a cycle of frescos, for Peleş Castle in Sinaia, on poetic motifs by the young Romanian queen. The queen, who wrote poetry under a pseudonym, was also the one who brought Hitz to the court. Here, then, we have a woman commissioning work from a female artist – a principle with a long tradition throughout history. Kobilca very likely also knew the painter Linda Kögel (1861–1940), who was very active in Bavaria. She, too, had a number of large commissions; among other things, she painted the apse of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of the Redeemer in Munich in 1903–1904. She reportedly came to making church murals through religious panel painting. See "*München leuchtete*": *Karl Caspar und die Erneuerung christlicher Kunst in München um 1900*, exhibition catalogue, Munich, 1984, 77.
- 6  
In private holdings. See SILVA TRDINA, Ivana Kobilca, in: *Zbornik za umetnostno zgodovino*, N. s., no. 2 (1952), 101.
- 7  
For more about this manner of painting, see GABRIEL P. WEISBERG, *Beyond Impressionism: The Naturalist Impulse*, New York, 1992, 28–47. The story of how Kobilca's painting was commissioned and executed is presented in more detail in BETI ŽEROVC, "Zelo slovenska slika", in: *Slovenski impresionisti in njihov čas 1890–1920*, exhibition catalogue, (ed.) B. Jaki, Ljubljana, 2008, 111–116. Kobilca selected and photographed most of the models for the figures in her painting while on holiday in Carniola; the painting itself she made in Bosnia.
- 8  
A number of Hribar's letters to Kobilca relating to the commission of the painting *Slovenia Bows to Ljubljana* are preserved in private holdings. For Kobilca's thoughts about the painting's basic concept, and her unhappiness with the suggestions by the mayor and the bishop, see her letters to her sister Marija from 8 January 1900 and 14 January 1900 (in private holdings).
- 9  
*Die Pariser Bohème (1889–1895): Ein autobiographischer Bericht der Malerin Rosa Pfäffinger*, (ed.) U. Wolff-Thomsen, Kiel, 2007.
- 10  
See *Die Pariser Bohème* (note 9). In Pfäffinger's account, Kobilca turns out to be much better informed and much more in the centre of contemporary events than in Slovene presentations of her. Among other things, we learn that a large number of works by Gauguin, Van Gogh, and Cézanne could be found in all the apartments Pfäffinger was financing: Gretor, for instance, is said to have owned at least six paintings by Van Gogh and a large number of his sketches. We also learn that Toulouse-Lautrec and Mette Gauguin (while her husband was making paintings in Tahiti), among others, were frequent visitors to this group – and so on. Georg Brandes and Friedrich Nietzsche (especially his work *Thus Spake Zarathustra*) were two of the writers they read and discussed on a regular basis. Gretor's circle of friends included, at various times, Anatole France, Marcel Prévost, Björnsterne Björnson, Paul Verlaine, Henri Becque, August Strindberg, Knut Hamsun, the soon-to-be-famous publisher Albert Langen, etc. For several years, Frank Wedekind was Gretor's personal secretary.
- 11  
Regardless of whether marriages between female painters and their male colleagues were based on love or self-interest, the women almost always supported their husbands. These women had income from property and inheritances, and because they almost always came from aristocratic or wealthy middle-class families, they raised, or at least solidified, their husbands' social status; they also brought them buyers. The painter Ferdo Vesel, a friend of Kobilca's, expressed his stoic view of such marriages in a letter to Rihard Jakopič, who apparently had asked if it was true that he had got married: »You know how it is with the painting business and how nervous a person gets when he sees he can't even earn as much as any cobbler requires. What Miss Klette told you is true, and if I didn't tell you myself before it was because I consider this a somewhat bold way to gain independence, but since I like painting more than dolls, one girl or another, it's all the same to me. Now I don't have any day-to-day worries, even if I can't do what I want. I hope I'll hit it big with painting one day, and then I'll be able to do what I want.« (Ferdo Vesel to Rihard Jakopič, 7 January 1899 /16/, *Correspondence of Rihard Jakopič*, organized by Josip Ilc, Moderna Galerija, Ljubljana.).
- 12  
The Sarajevo Painters' Club comprised the brothers Ewald and Leo Arndt, Max Liebenwein, and Ivana Kobilca. The club served as a platform for accepting different commissions and developing various joint projects. We can also conclude, on the basis of many indicators, that the painters shared a solid friendship. See LJUBICA MLADENOVIC, *Gradansko slikarstvo u Bosni i Hercegovini u XIX. veku*, Sarajevo, 1982, 101–103.
- 13  
For lists of members and students, see YVETTE DESEYVE (note 2). Among Kobilca's papers, in private holdings, are two membership cards for the association.
- For the broader context of the transition from completely negative views of the professionalization of women in art to their inclusion in the system of state university education in Germany, see *Die bildende Künstlerin* (note 2). For the evolution of similar processes in France, see TAMAR GARB, *Sisters of the Brush: Women's Artistic Culture in Late Nineteenth-Century Paris*, New Haven and London, 1994.
- 14  
For this reason, the association had very strict and exclusively professional criteria for admitting members. It did have other supporters, of both sexes, but they had no substantial rights. See YVETTE DESEYVE (note 2), 54–56.

15

YVETTE DESEYVE (note 2), 66.

16

YVETTE DESEYVE (note 2), 60.

17

YVETTE DESEYVE (note 2), 67.

18

This information comes from interviews with Kobilca's heirs. On the topic of Kobilca's bequest to Rosa Pfäffinger and her son, Georg, see also Pfäffinger's letters to Kobilca's sister, Marija Pintar, from 19 December 1926, 20 April 1927, and 1 May 1927 (in private holdings).

19

In the composition *Sternen* followed his teacher Siegmund L'Allemand and his older painting Ernst Gideon Freiherr von Laudon at the Battle of Kunersdorf (Heeresgeschichtliches Museum, Vienna).

20

For more on this, see BETI ŽEROVC (note 7), 113–116.

21

Kobilca did not wish to exhibit in Ljubljana just "for the sake of exhibiting"; experience had taught her that shows in Ljubljana only rarely led to sales.

22

RIHARD JAKOPIČ, *Slovenija se klanja Ljubljani*, in: *Ljubljanski zvon*, vol. 23, no. 4 (1903), 252–253. In the first decade of the twentieth century, Jakopič became one of the main exhibition organizers in Ljubljana. Among other things, he built his own venue for exhibiting contemporary art, the so-called Jakopič Pavilion, which opened in 1909.

23

See, for instance, TANJA MASTNAK, *Stereotipna ženskost, modernizem in Ivana Kobilca*, in: *Potlačena umetnost*, (ed.) B. Borčič and J. Mikuž, Ljubljana, 1999, 41–49; TANJA MASTNAK, *Ivana Kobilca in možnost likovnega izobraževanja za ženske v 19. stoletju*, in: *Časopis za kritiko znanosti*, vol. 32, nos. 215–216 (2004), 93–107; and ALENKA SPACAL, *Prostorska determiniranost umetnic*, in: *Likovne besede*, nos. 61–62 (2002), 98–106.

## Sažetak

Beti Žerovc

### Ivana Kobilca i njena slika za Ljubljansku općinu Slovenija se klanja Ljubljani u kontekstu ženskog slikarstva kasnog 19. stoljeća

Povod za tekst o slikarici Ivani Kobilci (Ljubljana, 1861. – Ljubljana, 1926.) bilo je razmišljanje o njevoj slici *Slovenija se klanja Ljubljani*, koja već više od sto godina krasi glavnu dvoranu ljubljanske gradske vijećnice. Prvi dogovori za sliku započeli su 1898. godine kad je za gradsku općinu slikala portret hrvatskog biskupa, mecene i istaknutog slavenofila Josipa Jurja Strossmayera, koji je odlučio financirati i veliku alegorijsku sliku za općinsku vijećnicu. Dovušenu sliku *Slovenija se klanja Ljubljani* potom su namjestili u dvoranu 1903. godine, kamo je bila dopremljena iz Sarajeva, gdje je umjetnica tada živjela. Slika je izuzetno zanimljiva, jer se uz nju možemo suočiti s određenim ključnim pitanjima tadašnje ženske emancipacije i profesionalizacije na likovnom području. Kao velika i važna javna narudžba, govori nam o ozbiljnom ulasku žena u zanimanje slikara, ali i o tome s kakvom je naklonošću kranjski prostor primao Kobilcu i – barem u njenom slučaju – nije podlegao diskriminatornim predrasudama. Izbor žene za ukrašavanje ključnih prostora grada zapravo je bila prilična rijetkost, budući da dodjeljivanje velikih javnih narudžbi umjetnicama u tadašnjoj Europi nikako nije bilo pravilo. Ipak se u članku prije svega bavimo nepovoljnijim aspektima povezanim s tom slikom. Činjenicu da slika u cjelini nije baš najuspjeliji

rad upotrijebili smo kao ishodište za razmišljanje o tome gdje su žene zapinjale na svojim umjetničkim putevima da se nisu mogle zadovoljavajuće iškolovati za slikanje takvih monumentalnih višefiguralnih kompozicija. U prvom dijelu članka najprije se u tom svjetlu bavimo školovanjem slikarica, koje je ponegdje još duboko u 20. stoljeću prema ženama bilo izričito diskriminatorno. Druga tema su nekakve opće zamke pri samom ostvarivanju ženske emancipacije, koje su često uništavale i nerijetko mogle posve uništiti potencijalnu žensku profesionalnu karijeru. Zaključujemo optimističnije, tretmanom početaka profesionalnog udruživanja likovnih umjetnica, koje se je između ostaloga uspostavljalo upravo kao aktivan odgovor na navedene poteškoće. Drugi dio članka namijenjen je recepciji slike i njene autorice, od prve prezentacije slike sve do danas. Između ostaloga zanimaju nas uzroci zašto lik Kobilce slabi i okoštava se u stereotip nerealizirane i umjetnički nejakke ženskosti.

*Ključne riječi:* Ivana Kobilca, žensko slikarstvo kasnog 19. stoljeća, recepcija i historizacija Ivane Kobilca, ograničene mogućnosti obrazovanja slikarica, profesionalne organizacije umjetnica