

*Nikola Božidarević. Veliki slikar dubrovačke renesanse / Great Painter of the Renaissance in Dubrovnik*, ed. Pavica Vilać. Dubrovnik: Dubrovački muzeji, 2017. Pages 104.

In the “golden” age of Dubrovnik painting of the fifteenth and sixteenth century, Nikola Božidarević with his preserved works stands out among the artists representing the so-called “Dubrovnik school of painting”. His works, paradoxically, include no more than five altarpieces, one of which is believed to have been executed thanks to considerable workshop assistance. For a painter whose works are but a few one can hardly expect to be presented in a traditional form of a comprehensive art monograph, yet the publication accompanying the exhibition mounted at the Rector’s Palace in Dubrovnik on the occasion of the 500th death anniversary of Nikola Božidarević (1517-2017) is on a good track to fulfil this goal. Despite fragmentary material, the catalogue *Nikola Božidarević. Veliki slikar dubrovačke renesanse (Nikola Božidarević: Great painter of the Renaissance in Dubrovnik)* succeeds in presenting the complexity of Božidarević’s significance on the Dubrovnik art scene of the first decades of the sixteenth century.

In the foreword, Pavica Vilać, head of Dubrovnik Museums, addresses the content of the exhibition held in the Rector’s Palace. The catalogue opens with a text by Vedrana Gjukić-Bender on the painter’s life and the known data of his work. Tracing archival documents, the publishing of which we largely owe to Karl Kovač and Jorjo Tadić, the author provides a survey of Božidarević’s biography before and after his (still puzzling) journey to Italy, which is considered to have taken place between 1477 (when he left the workshop of Petar Ognjanović for he “planned to go to Venice”) and 1494 (when, together with his father Božidar Vlatković, he was commissioned for the execution of a lost polyptych for the altar of St Jerome at the Dominican Church in Dubrovnik). Since his return from Italy until death—a span of twenty-three years—Božidarević produced sixteen paintings, partly preserved or partly documented in the archives. In a chronological survey, Vedrana Gjukić-Bender describes Božidarević’s fragmentary oeuvre survived to date, but also the patrons who came from all segments of Dubrovnik’s society, from religious orders and the Republic government in collective commissions, to noble families, canons and craftsmen in individual commissions. However, shreds of evidence upon which certain indirect conclusions about the painter’s life and work are grounded should be taken with caution. Thus for a painter who in the first decades of the sixteenth century signed the scene of *The Adoration of the Magi* at the church of the Holy Spirit in Nova Vas near Šušnjevića (Istria) as *Magister Biaxio Raguxeo* there is no confirmation that it is Vladislav, Nikola’s elder brother (older literature groundlessly referred to the Istrian “Vlaho of Dubrovnik” also as Nikola’s son), despite the assumed dating of the wall painting and the fact that the signed name can be considered double confirmation of the painter’s Ragusan origin. Given the apparent discrepancy between archival data and extant works in terms of quantity, a complex task of deciphering the basic biographical data of Božidarević’s life and work positions the text by Vedrana Gjukić-Bender as a departure point for the future research into the painter’s contribution to the art heritage of Dubrovnik.

Parallel essays in Croatian and English, which is a welcome feature of this publication, are contributed by art historians who have recently focused on Božidarević and his work from various angles. In his essay entitled »Nikola Božidarević između dubrovačke tradicije i talijanske renesanse« [Nikola Božidarević between Dubrovnik tradition and the Italian Renaissance], Radoslav Tomić starts from the conclusions drawn by Ljubo Karaman, who, back in 1933, came forward with the fundamental, and still currently accepted assumptions about Božidarević’s position with regard to local tradition, and places the Ragusan artist within the painting context on the Italian side of the Adriatic, trying to answer the question about the experiences that Božidarević brought from Italy, and how he incorporated them into the local painting heritage. Since the exhibition *Zlatno doba Dubrovnika: XV. i XVI. stoljeće* [Golden Age of Dubrovnik: 15th and 16th Century] (Zagreb/

Dubrovnik, 1987), Croatian art history has shifted its view on the mentioned “golden” period of Dubrovnik painting, which includes merely a seventy-year period marked by the work of the major exponents of the “Dubrovnik school of painting”, from the polyptych *Baptism of Christ* by Lovro Dobričević (1448) to the years 1517-1518, marking the end of the activity of the three painters who introduced the local painting to sixteenth-century Renaissance (Nikola Božidarević, Mihajlo Hamzić and Vicko Lovrin). The very abandonment of the term “Dubrovnik school of painting” (in this catalogue used with inverted commas) that had been inaugurated by Jorjo Tadić and Vojislav Đurić and adopted by contemporary Croatian art historians, suggested that, given the scarcity of the preserved works, the painting in Dubrovnik cannot be described by a concept that primarily implies the continuity of formal features belonging to the same artistic tradition, handed down from one generation to another over a longer period of time. Within the context of early sixteenth-century painting scene, Nikola Božidarević is perhaps the most rewarding figure with firmly attributed five preserved works (in comparison to two by Mihajlo Hamzić and only one by Vicko Lovrin), but also the most complex regarding the diversity of impulses that can be read from them. These very impulses have been pinpointed and discussed in the essay by Radoslav Tomić, who rightly omits the attributes “traditional” and “provincial”, and links Božidarević with the contemporaries in the Italian settings in which, it is assumed, he spent the seventeen years of his absence from the native city. His “carefully formed culture and visual language”, as emphasised by the author, after Venice the painter owed, most likely, to Marche and to Rome, where he became inspired by the works of brothers Crivelli, as well as Pintoricchio’s depictions in Rome and in Spello. Therefore, it is clear that the polyptych form, along with the golden background commissioned and present on the preserved work of the latest date, the polyptych at Danče (1517), executed after the altarpiece of the Đorđić family (1513)—the earliest altarpiece with a unified pictorial space of the *sacra conversazione* iconographic type in Croatian painting—should not be understood as retardation in style or “return” to the Gothic, but rather as an artistic reality which Božidarević was bound to encounter in the works of brothers Crivelli. The general features of the artistic expression of the brothers Crivelli cited by Radoslav Tomić are exemplified by quality illustrations of the polyptych painted for the church of St Dominic in Camerino (Carlo Crivelli, 1482, Milan, Pinacoteca di Brera), and that from the church of St Martin in Monte San Martino (Vittore Crivelli, 1490), clearly featuring the combination of the “old” and “new”, also typical of the solutions used by Nikola Božidarević. It is noteworthy that Pintoricchio too, upon his return from Rome to Perugia in 1495, did not abandon the polyptych form (cf. polyptych commissioned the same year for the church of Santa Maria degli Angeli/dei Fossi in Perugia, today in Galleria Nazionale dell’Umbria), and it is no surprise that it also prevailed in the wishes of Božidarević’s (and other) Ragusan patrons in the first decades of the sixteenth century, and later, as a representative form of an altar painting. An additional connection with the Umbrian setting and Pintoricchio, Radoslav Tomić sees in the link with the *all’antica* motifs present on the fully preserved carved and gilt frame of Božidarević’s polyptych at Danče. Apart from the contact with classical heritage communicated through an assumed contact with Pintoricchio’s workshop in Rome, with regard to the choice of form of the altar retable at Danče, one could even consider Venetian influence, emphasised by Radoslav Tomić in the solution of the depiction of St Martin which he links to the saint’s polyptych by Bartolomeo Vivarini (1491, Bergamo, Accademia Carrara), as well as St George slaying the dragon on the predella, close to Carpaccio’s Venetian solutions of the same scene. The layout and relationship between the painted panels on Božidarević’s polyptych at Danče correspond to the form of the so-called “Paduan format”, as defined by Peter Humfrey, almost fully respecting each of the five elements that determine it: three painted panels of equal height; “Tuscan type” of the predella with narrative scenes; wooden carved and gilt frame *all’antica*; a lunette with figurative depiction above

all the three painted panels; a tendency to unify the pictorial space (due to golden background on the side panels on Božidarević's painting it is partly achieved by uniform pavement of the "floor" of the pictorial space, as well as by a painted *parapetto* that continues at the same height through all three panels). A solution such as this may well be regarded as an additional confirmation of Božidarević's Venetian experiences, which through Carpaccio in Zadar and Venice, along with Bartolomeo Vivarini are emphasised by Radoslav Tomić. The author concludes his reflections on the painter's position between local tradition and Italian Renaissance with an inspiring thought that "the conversation about Božidarević, in spite of its being ostensibly totally exhausted, is not closed". Future studies might centre on the search for written evidence of the painter's sojourn in Italy, based on art connections detected in the preserved works. Within the context of Božidarević's oeuvre, equally interesting is Tomić's comparison with the reception of the works of his predecessor, Lovro Dobričević: "On the one hand, Dobričević's oeuvre has been hypothetically supplemented with paintings kept in important galleries and collections worldwide and discussed by art historians from Croatia and Italy. On the other, not a single new work the significance of which would have augmented his position in Dubrovnik painting of the 15th and 16th century has been ascribed to Nikola Božidarević" (p. 28).

Zoraida Demori Staničić contributes with a study devoted to a thirteenth-century icon from the church of St Nicholas at Prijeko, on which, at some later point in time, the figures of St John the Baptist and St Peter were added. The closeness between the saintly figures added subsequently to the portrait of the Virgin and the style of Nikola Božidarević was already observed by Ljubo Karaman, as underlined by the author who tended to link it more strongly with the Dubrovnik painter. In the earlier study (2013), prompted by the recent restoration of the icon, Zoraida Demori Staničić devoted less attention to Božidarević's "restoration", as opposed to the two centuries older icon, so that the occasion of the painter's 500th death anniversary proved a welcome opportunity for a detailed insight into the Renaissance intervention. The latter included the downsizing and change of the painting's format from vertical into horizontal, and apart from the addition of two saints Božidarević overpainted the figures of the Madonna and Child by refreshing the hand incarnate and clothes and "refashioning" the Madonna's mantle by painting large black flowers so that they resemble, as the author notes, extravagant imported fabrics of the Renaissance. Judging by the high quality of execution of the figures of the two saints, described in detail by Zoraida Demori Staničić (stressing that within the entire Božidarević's oeuvre "there is no face, particularly male, more beautiful than that of St John", p. 61), she is quite certain that the intervention was done by Božidarević himself, this kind of practice being further supported by archival data on his "embellishment" of an older altarpiece from the cathedral, commissioned in 1497. Besides in-depth analysis of Božidarević's added figures, which transformed the old icon into a small *sacra conversazione*, in the sections preceding it the author has provided a valuable overview of Božidarević's place in the artistic culture of the Dubrovnik area, with reference to her earlier research. Rightly emphasised in this contribution is the link with Venice, Rome and the regions of Marche and Umbria, yet among the painters who could have influenced Božidarević's work Zoraida Demori Staničić introduces a concrete name of a "minor" master close to Pintoricchio, that of Bartolomeo Caporali (Perugia, c. 1420–Perugia, before 1505). His figures from the altarpiece from Castiglione del Lago near Perugia (1487), disassembled and today preserved in museum collections of Perugia, Udine and Mentana, bear vivid resemblance to the portraits of Božidarević's saints.

A series of studies on the aspects of Božidarević's painting is concluded by Sanja Cvetnić's essay on the iconography of the preserved works. This being the topic of her earlier research, Cvetnić described the well-known works in iconographic terms, and by so doing, some of them are finally interpreted and contextualised. This primarily concerns the triptych of the Bundić

family in the Museum of the Convent of St Dominic, whose central panel, from the time of the work's execution, depicts a popular iconographic presentation of Mary in the Sun, and not Virgin of the Immaculate Conception as earlier cited. A survey of iconographic themes and saints represented on Božidarević's preserved works is given in quantitative relations, yet the author's "statistics", as she refers to it, is far from dull enumeration. Through the analysis of "static" presence of certain saints—as they themselves generally do not participate in the narrative of particular scenes but in full figure usually flank the figure of the Madonna in the centre of the retable—Sanja Cvetnić builds a "dynamic" account of Božidarević's iconographic solutions with regard to the spirit of his time. For a painter whose solutions in the context of what we today call style, often determined as bordering on tradition and innovation, it is no surprise that in some iconographic scenes the author recognised "medieval tradition, as well as some influences predictable for the spirituality of around 1500 in Christendom" (p. 69). Božidarević's saints, on the one hand, are related to the popular *Golden Legend* by Jacobus de Voragine, and on the other, a humanised presentation of the newborn Child on the predella of the *Annunciation* altarpiece from Lopud, for example, reveals an introverted piety typical of the turn of the fifteenth to sixteenth century. The fact that Božidarević's iconographic "narration" does not exhaust itself on "main characters" is best exemplified by Sanja Cvetnić in the conclusion: a whole world of holy figures and scenes is unveiled in the "additional" iconography of the decoration of the meticulously painted liturgical vestments, which again reminds of Tomić's earlier remark that "the conversation about Božidarević is not closed".

The publication is concluded by a catalogue of the extant works with reproductions, along with a section devoted to archival documents testifying to certain points in Božidarević's life and career. Although shorter catalogue entries provide all the key information about the works, while the studies preceding the catalogue point to relevant literature, art historians, especially younger generations who might have recently embarked upon the study of Nikola Božidarević, would certainly appreciate a comprehensive list of literature pertaining to the five preserved works, which is common practice in monograph editions towards which this publication aspires. The part devoted to archival documents contains transcriptions and reproductions of seven selected documents: apprenticeship agreement containing data on its annulment due to Božidarević's departure for Venice, five contracts for altar paintings, and a document certifying the painter's independence from his father's workshop. The reasons underlying this particular choice of documents become evident in Pavica Vilač's foreword, from which it is clear that three examples concern corrections of the hitherto known data (as cited by Kovač and primarily Tadić). A minor quibble is that the first and the sixth document are accompanied by photographs of the folia that do not correspond to the transcribed documents, while the overall effect of the documentary part would have been achieved with the translations of the last two contracts, as with those preceding them.

The greatness of Nikola Božidarević, suggested in the title of the exhibition and its catalogue, mirrors essentially in his "pioneering" and "different" approach, not only in his local Dubrovnik milieu, but also within the context of the painting scene of the entire eastern coast of the Adriatic Sea, so clearly exposed by the catalogue. As Zoraida Demori Staničić argues, despite the fact that Božidarević "has been written about more than almost any other Dubrovnik painter of the Renaissance, apart, of course, from Lovro Dobričević" (p. 49), the edition marking 500 years from his death is most certainly far more than a mere anniversary publication.

Tanja Trška  
University of Zagreb