

THE QUEST FOR THE SACRED IN THE PAINTINGS OF SAFET ZEC

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What kind of art could we introduce today into sacral spaces to radiate a universal message and to be, at the same time, a witness of our time? Has the search for the sacred disappeared from the horizons of contemporary art?

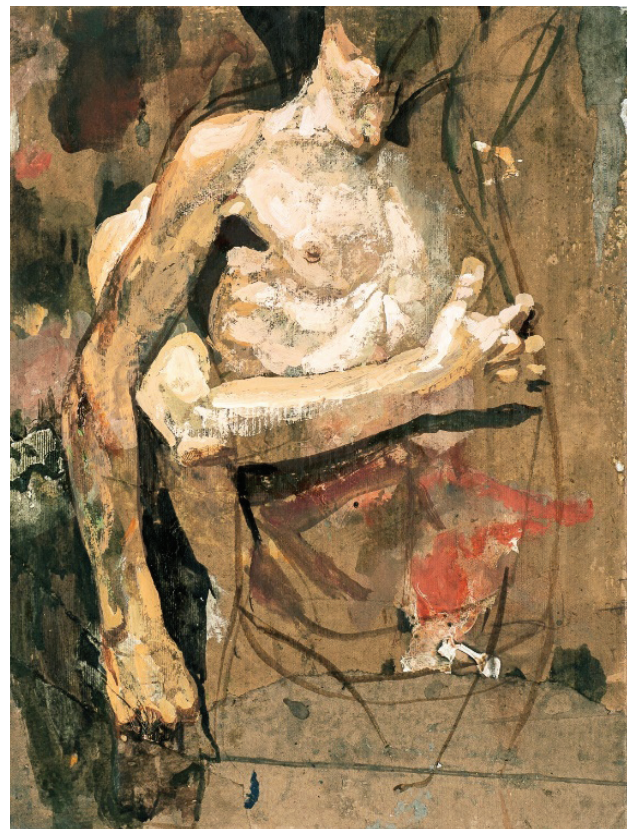
Jose Ortega y Gasset wrote in the 1930s that man has lost his essential characteristic, “the ability to gather into oneself.” However, we should not forget the fact that a large number of masters of modern art have dedicated significant parts of their work to the themes of *ars sacra*. Paintings of Safet Zec have been embraced by sacred spaces for the last twenty years. In 2005 and 2006, he exhibited his works in Scuola Grande di San Giovanni Evangelista, in one of the oldest and most significant sacral spaces in Venice, following in the footsteps of Carpaccio and Bellini. Or, more recently, in 2014 Safet Zec was chosen, among other competitors, to paint the great composition *The Deposition from the Cross* (oil on canvas, 172x289) for the Chapel of the Passion in Church of the Gesù in Rome.

From the very beginning, Safet Zec has adhered to the firm belief that a painting makes sense only when it addresses another man and when it addresses the central issues of human existence. Safet Zec inextricably believes in the power of painting to sublimate the drama of human existence and to offer a kind of transformed reality. That is why Safet Zec’s painting resonates so powerfully in the spaces of the sacred and when portraying the themes of human suffering, temptation, the struggle between good and evil. Although much has been written about the meaning of motifs in his painting (the importance of childhood rooms, facades of old Bosnian houses, harems of mosques, still lifes), Safet Zec is, in fact, one of the few artists for whom the whole visual world can represent a challenge, a topic. In *Letters to a Young Poet*, the

poet Reiner Maria Rilke advises his young colleague, who turned to him for advice on the nature of artistic creation, in the following words:

“If your everyday life seems poor, don’t blame it; blame yourself; admit to yourself that you are not enough of a poet to call forth its riches; because for the creator there is no poverty and no poor, indifferent place.” (Rilke, 1903:14)

When Safet Zec made his appearance on the art scene in the early seventies of the last century, mostly with fairytale landscapes of Bosnia, he won the





immediate attention of art critics, who recognized his exceptional painting skill. The motifs of *Sister's House* (1974), *Mother's Room* (1976), *Landscape with a Road* (1976) were filled with the lived experience of a culture and spirituality that was inscribed in the then synchronous and multilayered weaving of European postmodernity. To this day, Safet Zec has remained surrounded by things that make up his rich, inner world, whether in his Sarajevo, Počitelj, or Venetian studios. The motifs from the studios seem to have just been transferred to the paintings: wooden baskets with dried flowers, old photographs of Sarajevo, citrus fruits from the picturesque, Herzegovinian "stone city of green beard" (Z. Džumhur), freshly-baked hard crusty bread, wooden chairs, cans with brushes... However, his numerous early studies of *Hands* and *Embraces* from the 1960s, done in various techniques, already anticipated his later topics and interest in the ways how people express their feelings and quest for the sacred through certain gestures that speak the archetypal language of hope and faith.

Hands are the most difficult task for painters. They often hide more emotions and human experience than faces. The entire history of art could be written through the way great artists painted character and

feelings through human hands, following the eloquence of hands as they rest or are in motion, as they prepare for movement, and as they change it. Hands outstretched in hope towards another man, hands in prayer, hands exhausted by suffering, hands of love and support have appeared in all his cycles during the last twenty years, from a series of graphics *Christ Heals the Sick - Hommage to Rembrandt* to the great cycle of Srebrenica, *Deposition from the Cross* (Chiesa del Gesù, Rome, 2014), *Il Pane della Misericordia (Bread of Mercy, 2016/17)*, *Exodus* and *Embrace* (Chiesa della Pietà, Venice, 2017/2019). In palms, slightly bent at the prayer of the *Fatiha*, Safet Zec captures the light of divine grace. In the etchings *Hands for Prayer* (2005/6), in fine tonal variations, achieved by his exceptional graphic skill, Safet Zec writes a century-long search for God's grace, forgiveness, and compassion on the inner reliefs of human palms.

BEAUTIFUL AND MENACING

In moments of the greatest doubts about the meaning and significance of arts, at the time of the aggression against Bosnia and Herzegovina, Safet Zec returned to Rembrandt's graphic *Christ Heals the Sick* seeking for the universal message of human suffering and hope. While working on his most expressive cycle dedicated to the tragedy of Srebrenica, Zec played with light and shade in the manner of Rembrandt, to render his subjects at once beautiful and menacing (Spence:2005).

These are the elective affinities (*Die Wahlverwandtschaften*) that Goethe already wrote about and that allow great artists from different eras to be contemporaries. It is a certain vocabulary of forms that Aby Warburg called "forms of pathos" - certain forms of expression of emotional states that live from antiquity to our time and achieve the power of persuasion through imaginative arousal of pain and empathy - from the pain of the Trojan priest Laocoon and his sons over crucifixes from medieval altars and Rembrandt's *Pietàs* to Goya's execution of the rebels. In it, through the memory and repetition of certain gestures (intertwining hands, embraces, burials, silent crying), emerges a universally understood language of human suffering and compassion. On one level, these works, whose backgrounds are abstract blurs of colour and strobework, symbolise archetypal human suffering. They obviously echo the suffering Christs of the old maestros.





Bread is often featured in his still lifes: bread as a universal symbol of life and sacrifice:

“I am the living bread that came down out of heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread also which I will give for the life of the world is My flesh.”

(John 6:51)

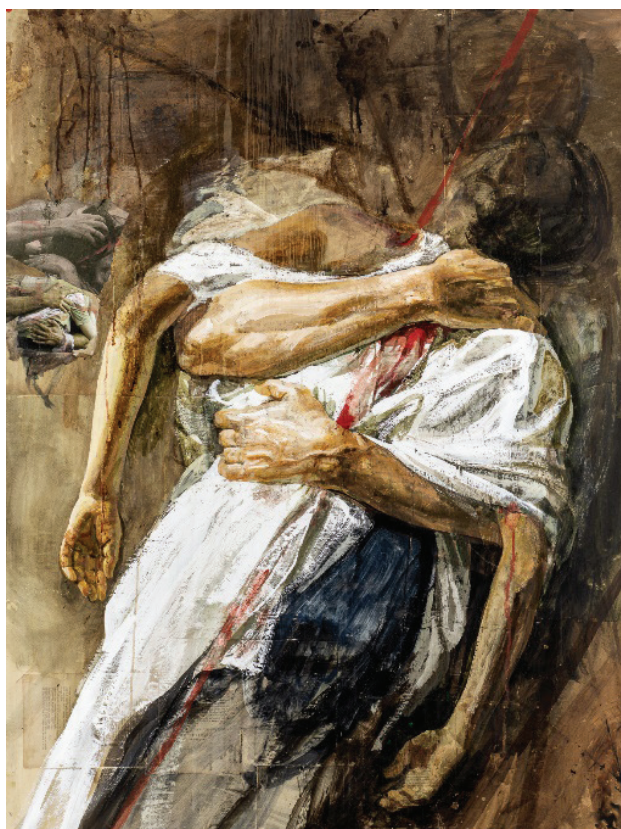
In many paintings in *Il Pane della Misericordia* cycle, Zec simply lays down freshly baked bread on the whiteness of a clean kitchen cloth. In a broken piece of homemade bread, Safet Zec embedded smells and memories of his childhood, but also a contrite and pious prayer, filled with reverence.

With these new themes, a new approach has emerged in his oeuvre since the late 1990s. The compositions seem increasingly open, unfinished and, in a sense, “imperfect”. His figures, meanwhile, have become more anxious, more tortured, more poignant. Arms reach upward as if grasping for something out of reach. Strong, urgent, loving arms embrace another person — one whose arms are limp, the body slipping to the ground. Instead of a somewhat idyllic-playful world of memories and a warm game of green and earthy tones of early works, the paintings from the last cycles featuring chairs from the studio, folded sheets, unfolded bed, bowl with brushes, fresh meat, embraces, hands etc. display a new expressiveness and a narrowed color scheme. The new approach is dominated by the disturbance of “whiteness”, its cooling with the use of blue-gray tones, a certain “soiling” of the perfect background, a destruction of balance, and an emphasized fragmentation of the whole. The paintings seem to want to

step out of the dedicated space of museum security and completeness. As the early cubist painters, Zec is fascinated by collage and often builds up his canvases out of old newspaper strips. Not only does the textured effect make the chiaroscuro more potent, but newspaper clippings frequently break through the finished work, annulling the aura of completeness of “museum painting”. The very surfaces on which Zec paints and draws have also become ever more complex. He loves varying paper textures; he emphasizes the fragility of old paper, old books, newspaper, their smell, and their color. He never works straight on clean white paper or canvas, placing instead a layer of other paper and collages of newspaper, to establish a base of color. His meticulous preparatory procedures have something in common with pious preparations for a prayer.

On a large format of paper background, with irregular edges and no frame, the facades of old houses transition into portraits of mothers and exiles. Each composition is fragmented into dozens of “micro-events”, which create a possible, independent whole from each segment of the composition – lead-





ability, a great painting culture in which the memory of famous predecessors resonates: from a series of graphics - *Hommage to Rembrandt (Christ Heals the Sick)* to the great cycle of Srebrenica.

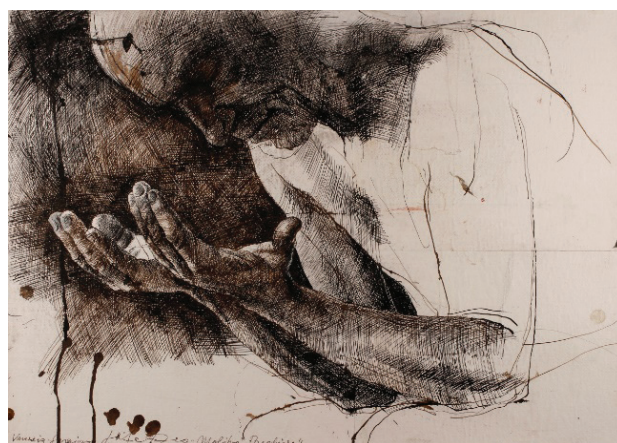
While working for the last twenty years on cycles that carry the painful experience of war suffering, an experience that evokes the closeness of faith and the sacred, Zec described an encounter with the face of a Bosnian mother and sought to elevate it to a universally understood language of suffering and pain:

I admire, and constantly before my eyes, the character of this older woman and mother. A small photo I found in some newspaper. A woman of ancient beauty, a beautiful old woman in a perfectly calm expression, whose eyes are full of tears. Silent, petrified expression and uncontrollable tears. Like all our mothers. This “beautiful suffering”, so to speak, I tried to realize in this great format, hoping to achieve the universal “calmness” of deep inner suffering. (S. Zec, 2009)

ing almost to sensory saturation. The transparency of the newspaper covering the edge of the plate, the reflection of the pot in the hollow of the spoon, the cracked crust of freshly baked bread, the embossed folds of the rug laid over the chair give Safet Zec's compositions an extremely plastic strength, testifying to his rich painting experience.

The multitude of preparatory studies of this artist are almost a rarity in contemporary production. All this is reminiscent of the great masters of modern art, such as Matisse, for whom nature was a mystery and painting an “inner trembling”, prayer, and meditation. Doubt and restlessness, which accompany great art, become in the graphics and paintings of Safet Zec a part of our experience - the experience of the observer.

In the works of Safet Zec, extremes meet in a unique way, as in life: ugly and beautiful, dirty and clean, permanent and transient (*Dirty Windows*, 1992; *Chair*, 1996/7; *Meat*, 2003), while questioning the conflicting feelings, through the theme of human face, this greatest mystery, as the greatest masters of modernity (*Portrait of a Mother*, 1972; *Srebrenica Cycle*, 1995-2020). In his oeuvre, there is a great mnemonic





HOW TO EXPRESS WHAT IS UNSPEAKABLE?

Safet Zec's search for the meaning of the sacred was also an obsessive, individual search for the answer to the following questions: How to paint the face of a cosmic tragedy as the genocide in Srebrenica was? How to paint the face of Srebrenica in July 1995? How to paint more than eight thousand lost souls? How to artistically express what is unspeakable?

Safet Zec's paintings, created in reverence for the Srebrenica tragedy, are gathered in four major cycles - *Faces*, *Bread of Mercy*, *Exodus*, *Embraces* - on which he has worked for the last twenty years, demonstrating his great knowledge and achieving the strongest expressiveness of expression so far. In the great cycle of *Faces*, Zec started from the realization that only humans have faces, and that every face carries an expression. The great faces of the pain and suffering of Safet Zec invite us to meet the experience of the individuality of each human suffering. It is an encounter

that seeks closeness and immediacy - it is an encounter in which the act of looking becomes an act of complete devotion and asceticism. In the face of the other in pain and suffering, in the feeling of the other as a sense of his own existence, Zec transcends the intellectual superficiality of our time in which the belief that "art is the expression of the person in whom I am, the artist is significant" (Karl Popper) prevailed.

In the face of these paintings, we are called to step into the loneliness that Hannah Arendt wrote about in her reflections on evil, in which an encounter with oneself takes place; an encounter in which the individual ceases to be a man of mass whose emotions can be synchronized; an encounter in which morality concerns the individual in its singularity (Arendt, 1964:138-9) and when, after experiencing a cosmic evil such as the Srebrenica genocide, the answer to the question of what to do ultimately depends on what I decide about myself. Only in the encounter with oneself, in that infinity of loneliness, is the absolute beginning born, the moral life begins, the decision is made. In questions about these borderline situations, art itself is confronted with a decision about the meaning and possibilities of its action.

The clasped hands of a mother who covers the mouth with her headscarf, suppressing a painful cry; intertwined, tired hands carrying the crippled bodies of the wounded; hands supporting a painfully bowed head, dumb in the face of evil; hands begging and crying for help; hands lying helplessly beside the lifeless body build reliefs of human suffering on the large paintings of Safet Zec. His large canvases dissolve his artistic and ethical credo providing a "response to the sarcasm of contemporary art, which has completely forgotten its duties, but also its powers." (Jean Clair: 1997).

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