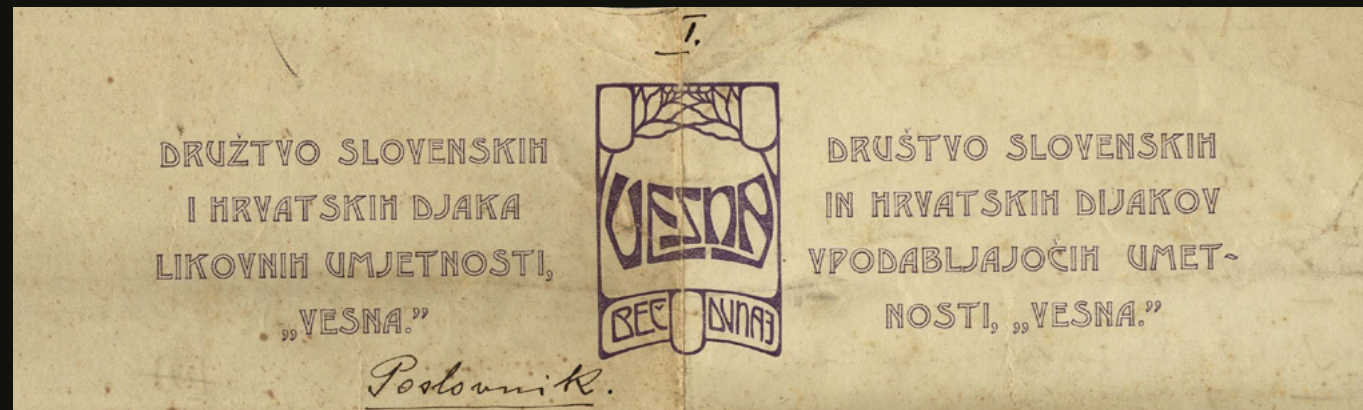


Ivan Meštrović and the Vesna Society



SI. / Fig. 1 Stationery with the Vesna Artists' Society letterhead. Manuscript collection of the National and University Library, Ljubljana / Dopisnica sa zaglavljem umjetničkog društva Vesna. Rukopisna zbirka Narodne i univerzitetne knjižnice u Ljubljani.

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Ivan Meštrović i društvo Vesna

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SAŽETAK

Članak se fokusira na sudjelovanje Ivana Meštrovića u društvu umjetnika Vesna – činjenicu koja se redovito navodi u raznim vrelima, posebice slovenskim, između ostaloga i radi isticanja ugleda tog društva, no bez objašnjenja koja je zapravo bila njegova uloga u društvu i zašto ga je relativno brzo napustio. Kako bi se rasvijetlila ova zbivanja, prikazani su neki od međusobnih odnosa budućih *vesnana* (prije formalnog osnutka društva), a zatim i pojedini segmenti djelovanja društva koji mogu čvršće definirati ulogu njegovih hrvatskih članova i hrvatsko-slovenske odnose unutar njega.

Društvo umjetnika Vesna službeno je osnovano u proljeće 1903. kao udruga slovenskih i hrvatskih studenata likovne umjetnosti u Beču, slijedeći trend različitih oblika udruživanja, učestalih u glavnome gradu Austro-Ugarske u to vrijeme. Vjerojatno su presudan utjecaj na društvo Vesna imale udruge likovnih umjetnika koji su svoje karijere tada učinkovito optimizirali upravo združivanjem snaga (na primjer društva Secesija i Hagenbund). Neki od istaknutijih aktivnih slovenskih članova Vesne bili su Franc Berneker, Gvidon Birolla, Ante Gaber, Maksim Gaspari, Zalka Novak Sever, Svetoslav Peruzzi, Hinko Smrekar, Viljem Sever, Ruža Sever Šantel i Saša Šantel, dok su najistaknutiji hrvatski članovi bili Josip Hren, Ivo Kerdić, Tomislav Krizman, Ivan Meštrović, Mirko Rački i Marko Rašica. Hrvatsko-slovenski savez ubrzo se počeo raspadati. Dok su hrvatski članovi uglavnom bili manje zainteresirani za rad društva, brojčano jači Slovenci dominirali su u radu, optužujući pritom Hrvate da nisu dovoljno angažirani. Statut društva Vesna službeno je potvrđen 7. travnja 1904. samo za slovensko društvo. Nakon raspada, nekolicina Hrvata ipak je ostala djelatna u društvu, ponajprije Ivo Kerdić i Marko Rašica, koji je kasnije i živio i radio u Ljubljani. No i slovenski dio društva već je početkom 1906. došao u kritičnu i završnu fazu, da bi iste godine konačno prestao s radom.

→

ABSTRACT

The article focuses on Ivan Meštrović's participation in the Vesna Artists' Society, as it is regularly mentioned in various, especially Slovenian, art-historical writings, though more as an emphasis enhancing the reputation of the Society without explaining what his role in the Society actually was and why he left it relatively quickly. To shed light on these aspects, some of the mutual relationships between the future Vesna members before the Society's establishment will be presented, followed by the selected segments of the activities that can provide a more solid definition of the Croatian members of the Society and the Croatian-Slovenian relations within it.

KEYWORDS

Ivan Meštrović, Ivo Kerdić, Tomislav Krizman, Mirko Rački, Vesna Artists' Society, Croatian Artists' Society Medulić

NOVA ISTRAŽIVANJA | NEW RESEARCH

Beti Žerovc

Department of Art History, Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana /
Odsjek za povijest umjetnosti, Filozofski Fakultet Sveučilišta u Ljubljani

Društvo Vesna bavilo se prvenstveno pobuđivanjem nacionalne svijesti te organizacijskim djelovanjem. Vesna nije imala program koji bi formalno propisivao poželjan likovni sadržaj ili formu. Slijedom toga, umjetnički radovi njezinih članova bili su iznimno raznoliki već za njezina postojanja, zbog čega je teško bilo što od te produkcije definirati kao karakterističnu umjetnost društva. Danas općeprihvaćena percepcija članova društva Vesna kao umjetnika koji su crtali i slikali vesele likove u narodnim nošnjama uvelike se ustalila i učvrstila kasnije, u razdoblju kada se sjećanje na to društvo kao umjetnički fenomen njegovalo uglavnom na slovenskom području, pritom posve zanemarujući umjetničku produkciju njegovih hrvatskih članova.

Meštrovićeva povezanost s Vesnom i njezinim pripadnicima zaslužuje veću pozornost nego što joj se trenutačno posvećuje. Ne samo da je taj krug upoznao Meštrovića s istaknutim pojedincima slovenskoga kulturnog i društvenog života nego je preko članova Vesne i kroz razgovore s njima, kao i u okviru društva općenito, upoznao Kranjsku do te mjere da je ondje prodavao svoja djela, izradio prijedloge dvaju spomenika u Ljubljani — Franji Josipu I. 1903. i Juriju Vegi 1904. — te u Ljubljani i izlagao ujesen 1904. Može se stoga zaključiti da mu je slovenski prostor bio iznimno važan na početku umjetničke karijere, ali i da je i Meštrović njemu bio relevantan te da je pridonio razvoju modernih tendencija u slovenskom kiparstvu.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI

Ivan Meštrović, Ivo Kerdić, Tomislav Krizman, Mirko Rački, Društvo slovenskih i hrvatskih studenata likovne umjetnosti Vesna, Društvo hrvatskih umjetnika Medulić

The Vesna Artists' Society was officially established in the spring of 1903 as an association of Slovenian and Croatian visual arts students in Vienna, following the trend of various forms of association evident in the Austro-Hungarian capital at the time. The Vesna Society can be associated with similar (student) societies on a national or multinational basis. For example, its activities often revealed close connections with the Slovenia Society.¹ The associations of visual artists, who, at the time, effectively optimised their careers precisely through collective efforts, probably represented a crucial influence on the Vesna Society. The impact of the most famous Austrian association of this kind at the time, the Vienna Secession, can be inferred from the very name Vesna, which suggests proximity to the Secession ideas of the rebirth of art, as well as to the name of the Secession magazine *Ver Sacrum* (Sacred Spring). As it happens, Vesna is the name of the Slavic goddess of spring, and in the Slovenian language, the word *vesna* is, in fact, a synonym for spring.²

The discussions about the Vesna Society, or regarding the establishment of a common society of all Slavic students of fine arts, began in 1902. However, for various reasons, only Croats and Slovenians ultimately formed a joint organisation.³ Some of the more prominent active Slovenian members of Vesna included Franc Berneker, Gvidon Birolla, Ante Gaber, Maksim Gaspari, Zalka Novak Sever, Svetoslav Peruzzi, Hinko Smrekar, Viljem Sever, Ruža Sever Šantel, and Saša Šantel, while the most prominent Croatian members were Josip Hren, Ivo Kerdić, Tomislav Krizman, Ivan Meštrović, Mirko Rački, and Marko Rašica. Soon, the Croatian-Slovenian alliance started falling apart. While the Croatian members were mostly less interested in the Society, the numerically stronger Slovenians ran the organisation as they saw fit but simultaneously accused the Croats of not being involved enough. On 7 April 1904, the Vesna Society's articles of association were officially confirmed only for the Slovenian Society. After the dissolution, a few Croats nevertheless remained active in it for quite some time, though more visibly only Marko Rašica, who later lived and worked in Ljubljana, and Ivo Kerdić in particular. However, even the Slovenian part of the Society reached a critical and final stage as early as the beginning of 1906, until it finally stopped operating that same year. Not even a year later, after a short period of initial enthusiasm following their break-up with the Croats, more and more Slovenian members became disinterested and left, while the Society was beset by constant bickering. Some of the active regular members of Vesna also graduated in the middle of 1905 and started to return home from Vienna.

The main goals of the Vesna Society included promoting national art and encouraging the collaborative presentation of young artists. It had no other fundamental orientations in terms of prescribing the contents or forms of the appropriate art. Only the first two points of its rules could be described as a programme: "The purpose of the Society is to cultivate the visual arts considering the Slovenian and Croatian national aspirations." The second point adds to the first one: "The Society's purpose shall be achieved by the following means:

¹ Regarding the connections with the Slovenia Society, see Žerovc, "Vesna ob izviru umetnosti", 53, 63; Tavčar, "Vesna v časopisnih noticah", 355-356.

² For more information about the Viennese artists' societies, see, for example: Husslein-Arco, Boeckl, Krejci, *Hagenbund. A European Network of Modernism. 1900 to 1938*; about the Vienna Secession in relation to contemporaneous Croatian art, see Rollig, Kraševac, Vugrinec, *The Challenge of Modernism*. Regarding the present article, it is worth underlining that both the Secession and the Hagenbund associations were primarily concerned with ensuring the successful exhibiting for their members and with the broader presentation of contemporary artistic trends rather than with any ideological or stylistic unification of their membership.

³ "Akademično društvo 'Vesna' na Dunaju". Already on 7 December 1902, Gaspari wrote to his patron, Josip Niko Sadnikar, about the meeting of the new society of South Slavic academics. He noted that not enough invitees had attended the meeting to establish the association but that a preparatory committee had been organised to keep working towards this goal. Sadnikar's legacy, Gaspari's letter to Sadnikar, Vienna, 7 December 1902. [In this article, the quotes from Gaspari's letters are edited to make them readable, e.g. the unusual spacing and abundant punctuation have been omitted.] // See also Josip Hren's writings (related to footnote 26), underlining the lack of unity as the main reason for failing to ensure broader association. Serbs also occasionally appear as the potential partners of the Vesna Society, for example in memoirs. For more about this, see: Žerovc, "Vesna ob izviru umetnosti", 75.

⁴ Ibid., 53-55; Šantel, "Spomini na dunajsko šolanje", 93. Regarding the break-up of the Society, see footnotes 42 and 44. // The following are two review articles on the Slovenian and Croatian students at the *Kunstgewerbeschule* (School of Arts and Crafts) in Vienna, where many Vesna members either graduated or studied before moving on to the *Akademie der bildenden Künste* (Academy of Fine Arts): Kos, "Reforme oblikovanja v 19. stoletju", 118-142; Magaš Bilandžić, "The Vienna Kunstgewerbeschule", 379-432.

organising its art exhibitions (in the homeland), gathering at meetings, encouraging the cultivation of arts on the national level, informing the younger colleagues who are just starting out or require advice, and mediating with regard to art commissions for the benefit of its members.”⁵

Although exhibitions are listed as the first practical programme objective of the new organisation, they can also serve as an illustration of its planned activities, which were discussed extensively and incessantly in the Society — though without any tangible effects. Not even the Society’s sole seriously planned independent exhibition in Ljubljana in 1904 did, in fact, take place, although its members had already announced it in the media. While the Vesna Society existed, its members only participated in a single collective exhibition, and even in this case, this was not an independent event but a group exhibition that mainly gathered the participants along the political lines in the context of bringing together South Slavic artists.⁶ We are referring to the First Yugoslav Art Exhibition in Belgrade in 1904, where Ivo Kerdić was the only Croatian artist to exhibit his works as a part of what was by then already a Slovenian group.⁷ Throughout its existence, the actual activities carried out by Vesna were thus restricted mainly to the social activities taking place in the Vienna student circle (gatherings, parties, lectures, etc.) and small practical undertakings, such as competitions for minor graphic works.⁸

The Vesna Society was mainly concerned with the national awakening as well as organisational and social activities. It did not have any programmes formally prescribing the appropriate art contents or forms according to any specific criteria of its own. Consequently, the works of its members were exceedingly diverse already during its existence, which is why it is difficult to define anything as the characteristic art of the Vesna Society. If we count the few works produced within the Society and in the framework of the competitions it organised, then Vesna managed to produce but a few relatively modest works of drawing and design. What is now a generally accepted perception of the Vesna Society members as the artists who drew and painted merry characters in folk costumes was largely established and consolidated later when the memory of the Vesna Society as an art phenomenon was being preserved mainly in the Slovenian territory, while completely ignoring the artistic production of its Croatian members. Moreover, the Vesna Society was becoming increasingly associated with Maksim Gaspari and his way of work in particular.⁹ Such a substantive and formal framework does not leave any room even for such Slovenian members as Franc Berneker¹⁰ or Svetoslav Peruzzi, let alone the majority of Croats, who soon exhibited a strong interest in existential themes and an openness not only to Secession and Symbolism but also to the newest artistic trends such as Expressionism, for example.¹¹ Until recently, not even the basic facts about the Vesna Society have been researched and published, and this is very likely the reason why only some of its members and certain segments of its activities have represented an arbitrary focus of its image. Croatian

⁵ *Pravila društva slovenskih in hrvatskih dijakov vpodobljajočih umetnostij*, 2–3.

⁶ “Umetniško društvo ‘Vesna’”.

⁷ When the more prominent actors first appear more prominently in the text, the footnotes related to them will provide a brief presentation of their activities during their membership in the Vesna Society, pertinent to this article, or contain a reference to the relevant literature. // The Croatian artist Ivo Kerdić (1881–1953) started his professional career as a locksmith. In the context of the World Exhibition, he travelled to Paris and worked briefly for the La Maison Moderne gallery. In 1902, he arrived in Vienna, where he worked in the local locksmith workshops and attended courses, e.g. at the School of Arts and Crafts. Only as late as between 1906 and 1911, he studied engraving and medal-making with Rudolf Marschall at the Academy of Fine Arts. Roje-Depolo, Mažuran-Subotić, *Ivo Kerdić*, 145–6; Alujević, “Croatian Sculptors in Vienna”, 93–95. In his memoirs, Kerdić occasionally mentions the relations between the Vesna Society members: Kerdić, *Moj život i uspomene*.

⁸ About the competition for the cover of Cankar’s book *Gospa Judit*, see: Smrekar, “Vesna”, 614.

⁹ The reasons for this are analysed in Žerovc, “Vesna ob izviru umetnosti”, especially 63–66. Gaspari built his career on a formal and substantive combination of graceful, slight stylisation of folk and peasant motifs. As the most recognisable and agile among the Slovenian members of the Vesna Society after its dissolution, he soon became a sort of an “official representative” of the now-defunct association, which he used to legitimise his work. He claimed that his mass production of folk motifs was rooted in his commitment to the youthful ideals from the time of the Society. About Maksim Gaspari (1883–1980), see, for example: Mikuž, *Maksim Gaspari in kamniško mesto* and Mikuž, *Maksim Gaspari*. Similar motifs, though in a different context and much more distinctly stylised, were cultivated by the Slovenian painter Gvidon Birolla (1881–1963). A few years after graduating from the Academy of Fine Arts, Birolla took over his home business and almost completely abandoned his artistic endeavours for decades. Birolla has not yet been the subject of thorough scientific research. See, for example: Kermavnar, “Birolla Gvidon”, 438–440. Both Birolla and Gaspari were active members of the Vesna Society and, at various times, its secretaries.

¹⁰ The Slovenian sculptor Franc Berneker (1874–1932) enrolled in the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts in 1897 and completed his specialisation with Edmund von Hellmer. Spanžek, Hergold, *Franc Berneker*, 15. He was a Committee member and Vice-President of the Vesna Society. See: Žerovc, “Vesna ob izviru umetnosti”, 52, 58.

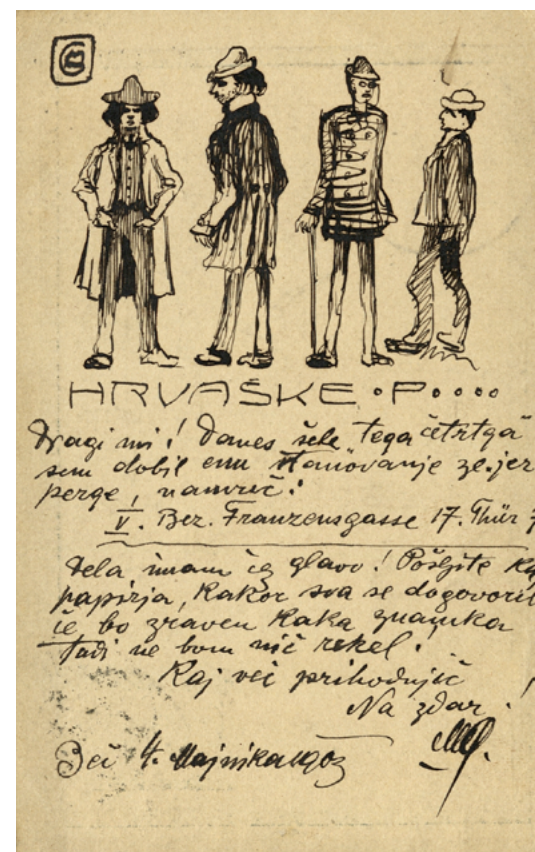
¹¹ Several works by the Croatian Vesna members, created while the Society existed, are presented in: Rollig, Kraševac, Vugrinec, *The Challenge of Modernism*. Even this limited overview of their creativity at the time reveals the differences between them and the creativity of the Slovenian Vesna Society members, particularly in today’s perception of this Society.

¹² Žerovc, “Vesna ob izviru umetnosti”. Tavčar, “Vesna v časopisnih noticah”. Tavčar followed the Society’s activities through the media publications related to Saša Šantel, and she also focused on its female members’ involvement and activities.

¹³ Sadnikar’s legacy. Gaspari, *Ob desetletnici smrti Ivana Meštrovića*, typescript.

¹⁴ Uskoković, “Monumentalizam kao struja”, 4–25.

¹⁵ Kečkemet, *Život Ivana Meštrovića*. Sometimes, the texts do not even mention that they are discussing the Vesna Society members. For example, during the Vesna period, Meštrović wrote to his father about Emica, a Slovenian girl who died very young and was allegedly in love with him until the end. He put a wreath on her grave. Kečkemet, *Život Ivana Meštrovića*, 89. We can assume that Emica was, in fact, Jelisava Kreševič from Trieste, a regular Vesna Society member who probably studied at the Vienna School of Arts and Crafts like some other Vesna members. Tavčar, “Vesna v časopisnih noticah”, 361–62.



Sl. / Fig. 2 Maksim Gaspari, postcard with the Croatian members of Vesna, 4 May 1903; Meštrović on the far left. Manuscript collection of the National and University Library, Ljubljana / Maksim Gaspari, razglednica s hrvatskim članovima umjetničkog društva Vesna, s Meštrovićem krajnje lijevo, 4. svibnja 1903. Rukopisna zbirka Narodne i univerzitetske knjižnice u Ljubljani.



Sl. / Fig. 3 Hinko Smrekar, greeting card congratulating his friend Peruzzi, the winner of the competition for the monument to the Emperor in Ljubljana in 1903, with a drawing of the three first prize winners — Peruzzi, Berneker, and Meštrović — alongside an allegory of art, 13 December 1903[?]. Manuscript collection of the National and University Library, Ljubljana / Hinko Smrekar, čestitka prijatelju Peruzziju, pobjedniku natječaja za spomenik caru u Ljubljani 1903. godine, s crtežom trojice prvonagrađenih — Peruzzija, Bernekera i Meštrovića, uz alegoriju umjetnosti, 13. prosinca 1903.[?]. Rukopisna zbirka Narodne i univerzitetske knjižnice u Ljubljani.

art history has not comprehensively analysed the Society’s activities, and only a few meagre contributions about this topic have been published in Slovenia. Thorough interpretative and critical treatments have been even scarcer.¹² However, as soon we delve even a little deeper into the actual sources and the preserved documentation of the Society, we can see that the Vesna members rarely agreed about anything, not even what was supposed to be their primary goal: i.e., how to create national art. Among others, even Gaspari recalled that “We often had heated debates about fine arts. During prolonged arguments, pointed jokes were made, and serious critical questions were discussed, such as whether folk costumes were fit for sculpting or not. The sculptor Peruzzi did not believe so, but Meštrović later created one of the most beautiful pieces: his mother in the Zagorje folk costume.”¹³ In light of this statement, it is worth emphasising that even when such national heritage was used, the Croatian Vesna members, whose explorations of the national characteristics soon started to merge with Monumentalism, treated it much differently than the light-hearted Gaspari.¹⁴

The present article will focus on Ivan Meštrović’s participation in the Vesna Society, as it is regularly mentioned in various, especially Slovenian, art-historical writings, though more as an emphasis enhancing the reputation or perceived value of the Society without explaining what his role in the Society actually was and why he left it relatively quickly. To shed light on these aspects, some of the mutual relationships between the future Vesna members before the Society’s establishment will be presented, followed by the selected segments of the activities that can provide a more solid definition of the Croatian members of the Society and the Croatian-Slovenian relations within it.

IVAN MEŠTROVIĆ’S CONNECTIONS WITH THE FUTURE SLOVENIAN MEMBERS OF THE VESNA SOCIETY BEFORE AND DURING ITS ESTABLISHMENT

The texts about Ivan Meštrović contain few or no references to the Vesna Society and its Slovenian members. The notable exceptions are the works by the art historian Duško Kečkemet, especially the sculptor’s most comprehensive biography, titled *Život Ivana Meštrovića: (1883.–1962.–2002.)*.¹⁵ Quite the opposite, Meštrović is attributed a significant role in the biographies of the Vesna Society members. This asymmetry is logical, given the sculptor’s remarkable popularity and influence in Yugoslavia as the most successful artist of the new state, especially during the interwar period. The association with Meštrović boosted the artistic relevance and prestige of his less successful colleagues from the Vesna Society.¹⁶ However, while this phenomenon is understandable, the lack of information about this period of Meštrović’s life in the relevant Croatian texts is also inappropriate. Through the Vesna Society, the sculptor familiarised himself with Carniola to the extent that he sold his early works, made drafts for two monuments, and exhibited

there. At least in the early days of the Vesna Society, he was also truly close to some of the Society’s Slovenian members — certainly closer than the other Croats. This connection has been exhaustively documented in the preserved archives of the Society, articles published in the Carniolan public media at the time, artists’ memoirs, as well as contemporary personal correspondence, especially the frequent and very detailed letters that Maksim Gaspari would send from Vienna to his patron, veterinarian Josip Niko Sadnikar, in Kamnik.¹⁷ Other Croatian members such as Josip Hren,¹⁸ Ivo Kerdić, and Marko Rašica, who were also associated with the Vesna Society more intensively or longer, do not feature quite as prominently in these letters.¹⁹ While the Society was still active and especially after Meštrović resigned from it at the beginning of 1904, the presence of other Croatian members somewhat increased in the letters to Sadnikar, while the references to Meštrović became notably scarcer, though not completely non-existent.

Even before the Vesna Society was established, Ivan Meštrović had met the future sculptor Svetoslav Peruzzi and painter Maksim Gaspari, two Slovenian students in Vienna. It is almost certain that he first became acquainted with Peruzzi, his classmate in Hans Bitterlich’s class at the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts in 1902.²⁰ At the end of that year, on 25 December 1902, Gaspari also wrote from Vienna to his patron Sadnikar about socialising with an extremely pleasant Croat, Meštrović, with whom — according to Gaspari’s letter of 30 December 1902 — they would celebrate the New Year together: “In the evening, Meštrović will come to my place, and we will await the New Year. We will play chess, and I will offer him a cup of tea and something else from your present, as he is also very generous.”²¹ At least in 1903, we can then speak of a true and close friendship between the two young men, as well as between Meštrović and Peruzzi — the only of the Slovenian Vesna members to remain more closely connected to Meštrović even after his studies. The letters discuss how the young artists lived together or in close proximity, their private and artistic activities, and often mention Sadnikar’s purchases and commissions from the young Meštrović. The letters became much more intense in this regard after Meštrović and Sadnikar had also met in person during Sadnikar’s extended stay in Vienna at the beginning of 1903.²²

The fact that Meštrović made a profound impression on his Slovenian colleagues during Vesna’s early period and that they liked having him in their midst is probably also attested to by the fact that he personally, or rather his works, were represented on the Society members’ hand-illustrated letters and postcards. These representations appear independently or among the Vesna members in the preserved correspondence between Maksim Gaspari and Sadnikar, as well as in the correspondence with Gaspari’s friend, photographer, and amateur archivist of the Slovenian fine arts scene, Fran Vesel, an extraordinary member of the Vesna Society (Fig. 2).²³ We also encounter Meštrović on Hinko Smrekar’s congratulations postcard to Peruzzi, on which Smrekar made a drawing to comment on the first three places in the

¹⁶ In the art world, symbolic capital is, more evidently than in other fields, exceedingly relevant and desirable because it leads to advantages, including material gains for those who possess it. Given the kind of division of labour and work procedures that artists deal with, a large part of their success also depends on being properly positioned in relation to their fellow players. According to Pierre-Michel Menger, who has analysed such connections in art, this means, in particular, that people who are successful in the art world have mastered the triad *savoir — savoir faire — savoir être*. Menger, *Portrait de l’artiste en travailleur*, 41–45, 81. Among other things, such a situation also leads to the less successful artists striving to appear as connected as possible to those more successful than themselves, while the successful ones tend to “disregard” their ties to those less successful than themselves. For more on the economic aspects as well as the history of such connections in various areas of art and the reasons behind them, see: Caves, *Creative Industries*.

¹⁷ RZ NUK. Ms 1761. Fran Vesel’s legacy. Folder 114 (Arhiv društva Vesna); Sadnikar’s legacy.

¹⁸ The Croatian painter Josip Hren (1878–?) first attended the Vienna School of Arts and Crafts for two years and then, from 1902, studied painting at the Academy of Fine Arts under Christian Griepenkerl. His bohemian personality, constant migrations, and sympathies for the Nazi government of the Independent State of Croatia supposedly contributed to him being so little known today. Croatian Biographical Lexicon documentation. Working materials on Josip Hren; Magaš Bilandžić, “The Vienna Kunstgewerbeschule”, 415. Josip Hren was a vocal and active member of the Vesna Society as well as its first Croatian secretary. See also footnotes 26 and 41.

¹⁹ For more information about the Croatian painter Rašica, see: Žaja-Vrbica, *Marko Rašica*. In 1907, Marko Rašica (1885–1963) even moved to Ljubljana for a few years, probably mainly (or also) because his older brother Đuro, who had assisted him financially during his studies in Vienna, lived there. He was the director of the Ljubljana branch of the *Zemaljska banka* bank, which further explains the successful integration of the young Rašica into the Slovenian environment. Žaja-Vrbica, *Marko Rašica*, 53–57, 260–262. For Rašica’s stay in Ljubljana from the perspective of exhibitions and Carniolan artistic circles, see: Žaja-Vrbica, “Slikar Marko Rašica u Ljubljani”, 262–279. Rašica is the only Croatian member of Vesna whose biographical records feature this Society more prominently, perhaps also because he himself mentioned it quite often in his memoirs.

²⁰ For Ivan Meštrović’s Viennese period (1885–1962), especially his schooling, see: Kraševac, *Ivan Meštrović i secesija*, 20–21. Svetoslav Peruzzi (1881–1936) studied at the Vienna School of Arts and Crafts between 1900 and 1902, followed by four semesters at the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts. The matriculation records confirm that he and Meštrović lived at the same address at least during the academic year 1903–04. UAAbKW. Matriculation books, 1903/04. Although he is the author of several public monuments in Slovenia and Croatia, the sculptor Peruzzi has not yet been the subject of more thorough professional attention. He was the most closely associated with Meštrović of all Slovenian Vesna members; see: Žerovc, “Ivana Meštrović u Ljubljani”. For more about Peruzzi, see: Hudales-Kori, “Kipar Svetoslav Peruzzi”, 165–199.

²¹ Sadnikar’s legacy, Gaspari to Sadnikar, Vienna, 25 and 30 December 1902.

²² For further information about this, see: Žerovc, “Povezave Ivana Meštrovića”; Zika, “Meštrovićev avtoportret za pobratima”.

²³ The illustrations from a postcard and a letter from Sadnikar’s legacy were published in Kečkemet, *Život Ivana Meštrovića*, 76. RZ NUK. Ms 1761. Fran Vesel’s legacy. Folder 21 (Maksim Gaspari). Gaspari to Vesel, Vienna, 4 May 1903.



Sl. / Fig. 4 Svetoslav Peruzzi, postcard with the Spitting Hero motive, 9 March 1910[?]. Manuscript collection of the National and University Library, Ljubljana / Svetoslav Peruzzi, razglednica s motivom heroja koji pljuje, 9. Ožujka 1910.[?]. Rukopisna zbirka Narodne i univerzitetske knjižnice u Ljubljani.

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²⁴ RZ NUK. Ms 1761. Fran Vesel’s legacy. Folder 61 (Hinko Smrekar). File Pisma Svitoslav M. Peruzzi. Smrekar to Peruzzi, 13 December 1903(?).

²⁵ RZ NUK. Ms 1761. Fran Vesel’s legacy. Folder 47 (Svetoslav Peruzzi). File Pisma Fran Vesel. Peruzzi to Vesel, Vienna, 26 January 1910(?). As mentioned, two months later, two humorous hand-painted commentaries on postcards followed, though without any references to Meštrović in the text: *Der spuckende Held* (The Spitting Hero) of 9 March 1910(?), where Peruzzi makes fun of Meštrović’s sculpture of Miloš Obilić; and *Der Held mit Doppelkropf* (The Hero with a Double Goiter) of 17 March 1910(?), where he caricatures the famous sculpture of *Srda Zlopostleđa*, which was also featured on the poster for the Secession exhibition. RZ NUK. Ms 1761. Fran Vesel’s legacy. Folder 47 (Svetoslav Peruzzi). File Pisma Fran Vesel. Peruzzi to Vesel, 9 March 1910(?) and 17 March 1910(?).

²⁶ Hren, “Svetoslav Mihael Peruzzi”, s. 1.

²⁷ *Pravila društva slovenskih in hrvatskih dijakov vpodobljajočih umetnostij*; RZ NUK. Ms 1761. Fran Vesel’s legacy. Folder 114 (Arhiv društva Vesna), *Poslovník hrovaško-slovenskih dijakov upodobljajočih umetnosti Vesne na Dunaju*. Because most of the archival materials are unpaginated, the information is annotated with titles, dates, etc., to allow for its identification. For a more detailed interpretation of the archives and the Society’s activities, see: Žerovc, “Vesna ob izviru umetnosti”, especially pp. 53–63.

competition for the monument to Emperor Franz Joseph I in Ljubljana, attained precisely by the Vesna members Peruzzi, Berneker, and Meštrović (Fig. 3).²⁴ In this circle, however, such comments of the correspondents or allusions to Meštrović also keep appearing later. In 1910, for example, in his correspondence with Fran Vesel, Peruzzi once again included two caricatures of Meštrović’s exhibition in the Vienna Secession. However, by that point, the relationship between the artists in question was already significantly different in terms of their status (Fig. 4, 5). After his stay in Paris in 1908 and 1909, Meštrović returned to Vienna and became one of the most renowned personalities of the Viennese art scene. In his letter to Vesel, Peruzzi makes a laconic comment: “Meštrović rules the art scene here now, as you can certainly see in the press.”²⁵

A few bits and pieces about these early connections can also be found in the contemporaneous or almost simultaneous Croatian records. From an article about Svetoslav Peruzzi, published by the former Vesna Society member Josip Hren in the *Obzor* newspaper in January 1907, we can learn that acquaintances among the Croats themselves could also be made through the Slovenians in this circle: “In 1900, the young Peruzzi went to study in Vienna, where he spent two years under Professor Breitner at the Austrian Museum’s School of Arts and Crafts. In 1902, he was admitted straight into the third year of the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts under Professor Bitterlich. Peruzzi inspired a few Croats to follow him to the Academy, where we met and became friends with our Meštrović. In the same year, we, Croats and Slovenians, established the student artists’ society ‘Vesna’ together (after the lack of unity made us give up the initial idea of bringing together all the Slavs) [...]”²⁶

VESNA AS A SLOVENIAN-CROATIAN SOCIETY

The Vesna Society’s documentation about its activities, diligently kept by its members and preserved as part of Fran Vesel’s legacy in the National and University Library of Slovenia, represents the fundamental source of information for understanding the Society and the relationship between its Slovenian and Croatian members. The minutes and other documentation are meticulous and detail all sorts of topics, including various complications and problems. Based on these sources and in combination with the other preserved materials, it is possible to discern quite transparently the crucial developments in the life of the Society, the situation within it, and the connections between its members. The Society’s activities were precisely regulated by the rules written in slightly different versions on various sheets and notebooks. They were also printed, as well as elaborated on in the handwritten *Poslovník hrovaško-slovenskih dijakov upodobljajočih umetnosti Vesne na Dunaju* (Rules of Procedure of the Croatian-Slovenian Visual Arts Students of the Vesna Society in Vienna) (Fig. 8, Fig. 9).²⁷ It is impossible

to list the regular Vesna members — i.e. the true core of the full and active membership of the Society — because they are not named anywhere and cannot be accurately identified even by examining the relevant minutes. Many members refrained from speaking up at the meetings and thus did not get mentioned in the minutes, while many of those present and vocal at the Society's meetings were also extraordinary members or not members at all. The Society's legacy, kept in the National and University Library of Slovenia, includes the so-called *Knjiga oseb* (Book of Persons), which contains the members' names. However, as far as compiling a list of the regular members, this document can be misleading, as it seems to list only those who paid their membership fees. Paying the membership fee was an obligation that never quite caught on in the Vesna Society, even among its most dedicated members. Among the active Croats, Kerdić, Rašica, Meštrović, and Krizman — but not Rački and Bulimbašić, for example — are listed as regular members. Other (potentially) Croatian names also appear, such as Vilim Muha. Apart from the regular members, the Book of Persons includes the honorary members (only two, including Josip Juraj Strossmayer, registered on 3 May 1903), the two founding members and supporting members, who made financial contributions to the Society, as well as extraordinary members.²⁸

The printed *Pravila društva slovenskih in hrvaških dijakov vpodobljajočih umetnostij "Vesne" na Dunaju* (Rules of the Society of the Slovenian and Croatian Students of Visual Arts "Vesna" in Vienna) and the handwritten Rules of Procedure of the Croatian-Slovenian Visual Arts Students of the Vesna Society in Vienna provided for monthly General Assemblies, while a special Committee met more frequently — according to these rules, at least once a week. The Committee meetings were secret. Furthermore, the elections and the various duties of the Vesna committee members and other officials are described in great detail. Specific articles focus on various details, such as when a Committee member could take a vacation and who could authorise it. According to these rules, the Committee consisted of the President and Vice-President (one of whom had to be Slovenian and the other Croatian), two secretaries (one Slovenian and one Croat), a treasurer, an archivist, and two deputies, who also had to be Slovenian and Croatian. The amendments and additions subsequently entered in the handwritten Rules of Procedure of the Croatian-Slovenian Visual Arts Students of the Vesna Society in Vienna also provide insight into the further development of the Society, among other things. The Rules of Procedure were written for the joint association, and some of the amendments can be attributed to the fact that, for example, attempts were made to facilitate the Society's operations and ensure the equal inclusion of Slovenians and Croats. The parts requiring the duplication of functions were later struck out, presumably at the next stage of the Society's development. For example, in point A, the part 9/II was struck out. It specified that the deputy secretary "[...] shall be Croatian if the secretary is Slovenian and vice versa. This deputy shall carry out similar duties as the secretary and keep the Croatian or Slovenian books, respectively."²⁹ The



Sl. / Fig. 5 Svetoslav Peruzzi, postcard with the Hero with a Double Goiter motive, 17 March 1910[?]. Manuscript collection of the National and University Library, Ljubljana / Svetoslav Peruzzi, razglednica s motivom heroja s dvostrukom gušom, 17. ožujka 1910.[?]. Rukopisna zbirka Narodne i univerzitetne knjižnice u Ljubljani.

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RZ NUK. Ms 1761. Fran Vesel's legacy. Folder 114 (Arhiv društva Vesna), *Knjiga oseb*. In this regard, we should underline that the total membership of the Vesna Society may have never exceeded sixty to seventy members, while during the Society's best period, the number of its regular members was just a little over twenty. The membership system is explained in *Pravila društva slovenskih in hrvaških dijakov vpodobljajočih umetnostij*.

29

Pravila društva slovenskih in hrvaških dijakov vpodobljajočih umetnostij; RZ NUK. Ms 1761. Fran Vesel's legacy. Folder 114 (Arhiv društva Vesna), *Poslovník hrvaško-slovenskih dijakov upodobljajočih umetnosti Vesne na Dunaju*.

30

All references to the minutes are dated and indicate whether they refer to a Committee meeting or a General Assembly.

31

RZ NUK. Ms 1761. Fran Vesel's legacy. Folder 114 (Arhiv društva Vesna), *Zapisnik umet. društva hrvaško-slovenskih dijakov na Dunaju Vesne*.

32

The Slovenian painter and graphic artist Saša Šantel (1883–1945) is presented in detail, especially in connection with the Vesna Society, in Tavčar, 2021, pp. 353–375. He came from a family of artists, as his mother and two sisters were also painters. In Vienna, he studied painting, first at the School of Arts and Crafts and then at the Academy of Fine Arts. See also: Mrak, *Saša Šantel*.

33

The Croatian painter Pavao Bašković (1878–1943) studied at the School of Arts and Crafts in Vienna (1899–1903). Later, he worked as a professor at the Construction, Crafts and Art School in Split. Karamatić, *25 djela iz fundusa*, 1–2; Magaš Bilandžić, “The Vienna Kunstgewerbeschule”, 393, 410.

34

It was not possible to obtain any reliable information about Kuželički, a painter and active Slovenian Vesna Society member.

35

Viljem Sever (?–?) studied at the School of Arts and Crafts in Vienna, as did his sister, Ruža, who married her fellow student, the Vesna Society member Šantel. For more on Viljem Sever, especially in relation to the Vesna Society, see: Tavčar, “Vesna v časopisnih noticah”, 356–360; as well as about Ruža Sever (1879–1963), 362.

36

It was not possible to obtain any reliable information about Bavčić, a Croatian member and Vice-President of the Vesna Society during its early years.

37

The Croatian painter Mirko Rački (1879–1982) studied painting during the early period of the Vesna Society, first at a private school and then at the Academy of Fine Arts in Prague between 1903 and 1905. For further information about him, see, for example: Uskoković, *Mirko Rački*, and footnote 11.

38

After finishing secondary school in Trieste, the sculptor Ivan Bulimbašić (1883–1974) studied in Vienna, first at the School of Arts and Crafts and then at the Academy of Fine Arts. Due to illness, he temporarily suspended his studies and left Vienna. Kečkemet, “Ivan Bulimbašić”, 177–179; Magaš Bilandžić, “The Vienna Kunstgewerbeschule”, 387.

39

For more information about the painter and graphic artist Tomislav Krizman (1882–1955), who studied at the School of Arts and Crafts, the *k. k. Graphische Lehr- und Versuchsanstalt* (Imperial and Royal Graphical Education and Research Institute), and the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna between 1902 and 1907, see: Domac Ceraj, *Tomislav Krizman*, 145; Magaš Bilandžić, “The Vienna Kunstgewerbeschule”, 389–99 et passim. See also footnotes 11 and 50. In today's perception of the Vesna Society, prevalent in Slovenia, it is quite difficult to imagine Krizman as its member, although he was one of the most active Croats in it—not only because of his opus but also his image: for example, he wore an unusual, distinctly bohemian fin-de-siècle outfit with lace accessories. Maruševski, “Tomislav Krizman”, 12–16. Ivo Kerdić characterised such an appearance as deliberate attention-seeking and made a similar claim about Meštrović. See: Alujević, “Croatian Sculptors in Vienna”, 95.

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RZ NUK. Ms 1761. Fran Vesel's legacy. Folder 114 (Arhiv društva Vesna), General Assembly minutes of 20 June 1903.

minutes of the General Assemblies and Committee meetings confirm that the members consistently adhered to these rules and regulations, at least in the most active initial period of the Vesna Society.

The minutes of the Society's General Assemblies and Committee meetings (several notebooks and sheets), providing a detailed chronological account of the Society's actual activities and containing at least a slight indication of its artistic orientation, represent the most crucial part of this legacy.³⁰ These documents also clarify the relationship between the Society's artistic and social activities, which apparently had at least an equal role. Among this documentation, a thicker notebook with hard covers stands out. It is beautifully bound, decorated with vegetal motifs, and bears the inscription *Zapisnik umet. društva hrvaško-slovenskih dijakov na Dunaju Vesne* (Minutes of the Vesna Artistic Society of the Croatian-Slovenian Students in Vienna).³¹ The information contained in this volume should be accurate, as the Vesna members, at least initially, would first confirm the General Assembly minutes and only then copy the information into the notebook. It contains the minutes of probably all of the Society's monthly General Assemblies from the beginning until 20 January 1906 — at least until its activities began to decline rapidly. Interestingly, the first General Assembly minutes of 9 May 1903 are written in Croatian, while all the subsequent ones are in Slovenian. The text suggests that 25 members gathered, and the possibility that Vesna might become a mixed society rather than solely an academic fine arts association was also discussed. This proposal was rejected. A Slovenian, Saša Šantel, was unanimously elected President. There was much talk about the Society's good intentions, and already during the meeting, the songs *Lijepa naša domovino* (Our Beautiful Homeland) and *Naprej zastava slave* (Forward, Flag of Glory) were sung. Nobody minded that the President had just turned twenty less than two months before the election—probably because Vesna was a student association. Besides, this was the usual age of its regular members at the time.³²

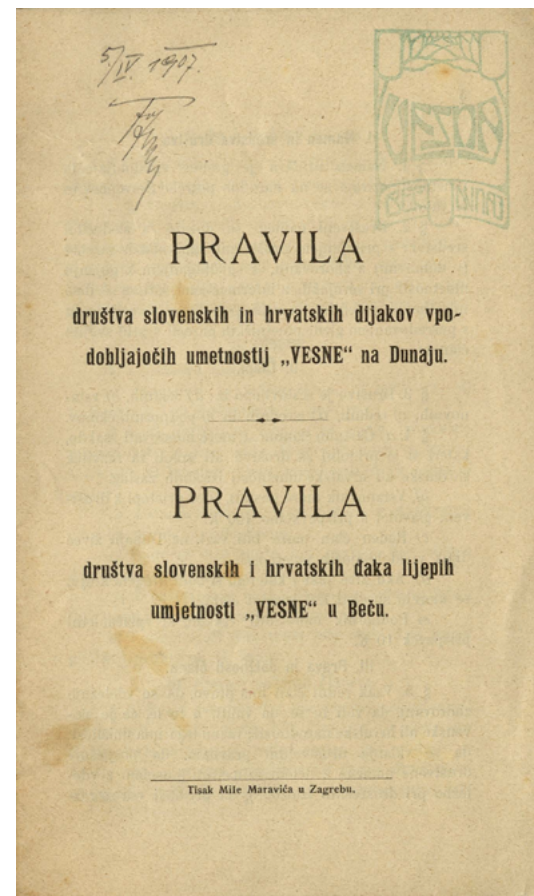
These initial minutes also reveal that on 28 April 1903, the State Representation granted the group the right to establish a society based on the rules drawn up by the preparatory committee, consisting of Saša Šantel, Pavao Bašković,³³ Svetoslav Peruzzi, Ivan Meštrović, Jurij Kuželički,³⁴ and Viljem Sever.³⁵ The first Committee of the Society was also a mixed Croatian-Slovenian body: it consisted of Šantel (President), Franjo Bavčić³⁶ (Vice-President), Kuželički, Meštrović, Peruzzi, Mirko Rački³⁷, Sever, as well as Ivan Bulimbašić³⁸ and Gvidon Birolla as auditors. Already at the second General Assembly, the Croatian Committee members Bulimbašić, Meštrović, and Rački renounced this honour and were replaced by the Croats Josip Hren, Tomislav Krizman,³⁹ and Bašković.⁴⁰ The listed names show that, at least in the beginning, the Vesna Society adhered to the established national criteria regarding the selection of the Committee members and the duplication of certain key officials. However, this soon turned out to be a painstaking and generally ineffective practice

because the effort was not based on practical needs but rather on an unbridgeable national division that should not have plagued such a Society founded in the spirit of (South) Slavic bonding. The problem persisted, and minor details could quickly lead to a feeling of being left out by one or the other side based on nationality. In the minutes, we come across national prejudices and bickering, especially regarding the competitions, where it seems that the Slovenians were rooting for their side, while the Croats did not even bother with their entries, failed to submit them on time, or not at all. The very name of the Society caused controversy, as it was officially confirmed as a Slovenian-Croatian association rather than, alphabetically, a Croatian-Slovenian one, which annoyed at least some Croatian members immensely. Apart from the minutes, the members' personal correspondence once again illuminated these events. For example, on 17 June 1903, Gaspari wrote to his patron Sadnikar about the forthcoming Society meeting: "The Croats are expected to cause much disturbance because they want the Society to be Croatian-Slovenian: Hren says things must be set in order, or all the Croats will leave".⁴¹

In short, it seems that the Slovenians would often exploit their majority, but they were also annoyed that from the very onset, the Croats were not as interested in the Society and took it much less seriously. According to the minutes, the Croats were regularly reproached for their indifference, for not taking their duties as Committee members seriously, for not paying their membership fees and, above all, for not agitating enough in Croatia at all levels. The Slovenians particularly resented the fact that the Croats failed to attract any founding and supporting members to the Society, and thus, its financing rested mainly on the shoulders of the Slovenians.⁴² The Book of Persons supports at least the latter accusation, as the list of the founding and supporting members practically only includes Slovenian names.⁴³ Some Croats agreed with these accusations. For example, at the General Assembly of 1 December 1903, two of the attending Croatian Vesna Society members who could be described as the most devoted and determined — Marko Rašica and Ivo Kerdić — once again regretted the behaviour of their fellow Croats and promised that "they would more zealously focus their efforts on the Society and strive for its flourishing". However, as already mentioned, the Slovenian-Croatian artistic bond did not last. In less than a year — already in the early spring of 1904 — the Slovenians transformed the Society into an exclusively Slovenian one, also with an appropriate official amendment of its rules.⁴⁵

THE REASONS OF THE CROATIAN VESNA MEMBERS FOR THEIR BREAK-UP WITH THE SOCIETY

As already stated, Ivan Meštrović was, in fact, on very friendly terms with some of the Slovenians. Initially, he regularly visited the Vesna Society, but he probably soon outgrew it and its petty bureaucratic complications. During the Society's



Sl. / Fig. 6 The title page of *Pravila društva slovenskih in hrvatskih dijakov vpodobljajočih umetnostij "Vesne" na Dunaju* [Rules of the Society of the Slovenian and Croatian Students of Visual Arts "Vesna" in Vienna]. Zagreb: Tisak Mile Maravića [1903]. Manuscript collection of the National and University Library, Ljubljana / Naslovna stranica *Pravila društva slovenskih in hrvatskih dijakov vpodobljajočih umetnostij "Vesne" na Dunaju* [Pravila društva slovenskih i hrvatskih đaka likovnih umjetnosti "Vesne" u Beču]. Zagreb: Tisak Mile Maravića [1903.]. Rukopisna zbirka Narodne i univerzitetске knjižnice u Ljubljani.

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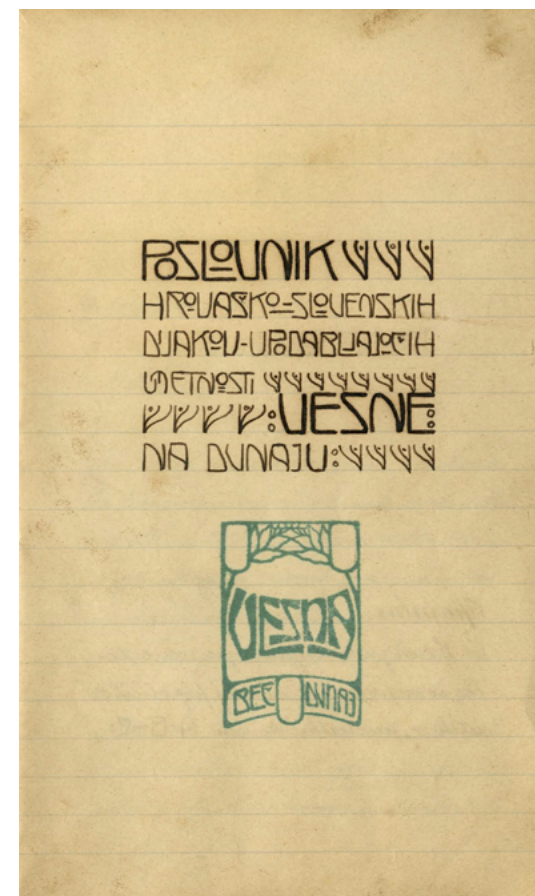
41 Sadnikar's legacy. Gaspari to Sadnikar, Vienna, 17 June 1903.

42 RZ NUK. Ms 1761. Fran Vesel's legacy. Folder 114 (Arhiv društva Vesna), the minutes of the Society's extraordinary General Assembly of March 1904. At the General Assembly, it was decided that Vesna would be transformed into an exclusively Slovenian society. The Croat Kerdić regretted this move, although he understood it. Others assured him that, despite the change, the interested Croats were still welcome in the Society.

43 RZ NUK. Ms 1761. Fran Vesel's legacy. Folder 114 (Arhiv društva Vesna), *Knjiga oseb*.

44 RZ NUK. Ms 1761. Fran Vesel's legacy. Folder 114 (Arhiv društva Vesna), General Assembly minutes of 1 December 1903.

45 The new articles of association were officially confirmed on 7 April 1904. They seem almost identical to the original version, except that this time, the Society was intended solely for the Slovenian Students of Fine Arts in Vienna. RZ NUK. Ms 1761. Fran Vesel's legacy. Folder 114 (Arhiv društva Vesna).



Sl. / Fig. 7 The first page of *Poslovnik hrovaško-slovenskih dijakov upodobljajočih umetnosti Vesne na Dunaju* [Rules of Procedure of the Croatian-Slovenian Visual Arts Students of the Vesna Society in Vienna]. Manuscript collection of the National and University Library, Ljubljana / Prva stranica *Poslovnika hrovaško-slovenskih dijakov upodobljajočih umetnosti Vesne na Dunaju* [Poslovnik hrovaško-slovenskih đaka likovnih umjetnosti Vesne u Beču]. Rukopisna zbirka Narodne i univerzitetске knjižnice u Ljubljani.

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46 RZ NUK. Ms 1761. Fran Vesel's legacy. Folder 114 (Arhiv društva Vesna), General Assembly minutes of 1 July 1903; General Assembly minutes of 17 October 1903. In addition to being called to order, the latter minutes identify Meštrović as a newly elected Committee member. On the function of the archivist, see: "V odbor dijaškega umetniškega društva 'Vesne'".

47 Sadnikar's legacy. Gaspari to Sadnikar, Vienna, 24 January 1904.

48 Žaja-Vrbica, *Marko Rašica*, 50. As Rašica criticised such behaviour, Meštrović reportedly never forgave him, "[...] as he also demonstrated by his actions every time he was presented with an opportunity." *Ibid.*

49 Šantel, "Spomini na dunajsko šolanje", 93.

50 Tomislav Krizman already exhibited in 1901 at the travelling 7th Exhibition of the Croatian Artists' Association, as well as in 1902 and 1903 at the Art Society exhibitions in the Art Pavilion. In 1905, he also exhibited at the 10th exhibition of the Mánes Society in Prague and, in 1904, at the 11th exhibition of the Hagenbund Society in Vienna. Domac Ceraj, *Tomislav Krizman*. 145. See also footnote 39. Regarding his dissatisfaction, see, for example: RZ NUK. Ms 1761. Fran Vesel's legacy. Folder 114 (Arhiv društva Vesna), General Assembly minutes of 7 November 1903.

beginnings, he participated in the Committee, while in 1903, he also briefly acted as its archivist, who was most likely the least busy of the Committee members because the Society's archives and especially the library had not yet been more extensively developed. Otherwise, the only concrete information we can find out about him from the minutes is that, on at least two occasions, "Meštrović makes extremely unsavoury remarks and is called to order by the President."⁴⁶ Apparently, his relationship with the Vesna Society started to fray very soon and ended rather dramatically. Even Gaspari, who was very fond of Meštrović and held him in high esteem, reported this to Sadnikar in a letter of 24 January 1904: "I am not on speaking terms with Meštrović, and neither are the others, because of the scandals he caused in 'Vesna' and his recent resignation. Croatian newspapers have also written about this insolence. Perhaps you have read about it!"⁴⁷ Unfortunately, the actual reason(s), let alone the details of the dispute or the withdrawal of Meštrović and Krizman — other sources indicate that they left together — are unknown. The considerable significance of their withdrawal for the Society is revealed by the fact that its members remained upset even decades later. For example, in his memoirs, the Croat Rašica wrote about this: "[...] the motives for their withdrawal from the Society were rather insipid, and they failed to show due respect towards their colleagues [...]."⁴⁸ The Slovenian Šantel, also in his memoirs, made a laconic remark that Krizman and Meštrović soon left the Vesna Society because they were "too fancy" for it.⁴⁹

Perhaps we can interpret the events in such a way, but perhaps it is probably closer to the truth that — apart from the aforementioned divisions based on nationality — the reasons mainly involved very concrete differences in the outlooks on art that we have already indicated in the introduction, as well as in the level of the artistic development and interests of the Society members. This is probably why Meštrović quickly started to lose interest in the Society, which mainly only managed to organise numerous gatherings and, more concretely, merely a few minor design competitions. Compared to their Croatian counterparts, the leading Slovenian members of the Society were much less ambitious or, at least, had different ambitions as students at the beginning of their careers without any exhibition experience. Even later, they did not become the crucial figures of contemporary Slovenian fine arts. Instead, they were educators and restorers, while their primary domains in fine arts included caricature, graphic design, and illustration. Quite the opposite, some of the Croatian Vesna Society members soon became the most visible representatives of their generation on the Croatian art scene, who, despite their youth, had clearly exhibited their considerable artistic and exhibition ambitions already during the Vesna Society's Slovenian-Croatian period. Tomislav Krizman, who was visibly dissatisfied with the pettiness at the Vesna meetings, had already exhibited successfully, especially at home,⁵⁰ before the establishment of the Society. Before its official ratification in April 1903, Meštrović had also participated in his first exhibition at the Vienna Secession, Vienna's main contemporary art

venue at the time. In 1904, he also started exhibiting with the Hagenbund group, both in Vienna and at travelling exhibitions.⁵¹ At the time when Meštrović, as part of the Hagenbund travelling exhibition, displayed six of his works in Ljubljana, the Vesna Society — which, by then, had already become exclusively Slovenian — had still made no significant progress in terms of exhibitions. The minutes from one of its sessions still only contain the following observation: “Our most courageous colleague is Gaspari, who proposes an exhibition at the ‘Hagenbund’. Others see the idea as rather risky.”⁵² After their break-up with the Vesna Society, Meštrović and Krizman also successfully drew attention to themselves with a solo exhibition, which they simply organised in their Vienna apartment.⁵³

Some of the other Croats followed a similar path, for example, Mirko Rački, who had different ambitions and outlooks on art and was a few years older than most of the Vesna Society members. It seems that he soon stopped taking the Society too seriously and that perhaps he also annoyed the other members somewhat. Already in the founding meeting minutes, where the nature of the Society was discussed, we can read: “Finally, our colleague Rački delivered a 45-minute speech on his various artistic and philosophical views, which he finished with the anthem ‘Our Beautiful Homeland’! Everyone present stood up and sang along.”⁵⁴ Obviously, his colleagues preferred singing to Rački’s elaborations. The General Assembly minutes of 1 December 1903 indicate that the planned lecture did not take place because Rački, who was supposed to give it, failed to attend.⁵⁵ Of the more prominent Croats, only two were on a better wavelength with the Slovenian members and maintained their association with the Society the longest. They were Ivo Kerdić — who, as already mentioned, was the only Croat to exhibit in the framework of the Vesna Society at the First Yugoslav Art Exhibition in Belgrade in 1904 — and Marko Rašica, who was also connected to Carniola through his brother, a banker, and who even moved to Ljubljana for a few years after his graduation.⁵⁶

It is quite possible and understandable that Meštrović, whose ascension among the most renowned young European artists had begun during the Slovenian-Croatian period of the Vesna Society, saw his participation in the latter as an insignificant episode, at least in retrospect. In any case, judging from the relevant sources, he rarely wrote or spoke about it. In various contexts, he would occasionally mention certain individuals associated with the Vesna Society rather than the Society itself. When the elderly Gaspari sent him two letters to the USA in the late 1950s to reconnect, Meštrović replied kindly and reminisced — albeit not in a very flattering way — about Gaspari: “[...] I remember those happy days from our youth in Vienna, which seem much better to us now, probably only because we were young. I also recall some amusing experiences, such as the one in the Engalgasse alley, when Gaspari and Hren ran away like chickens as the Germans came at us with clubs, but Peruzzi and I waited for them, smashed one’s head in with his own club, and then ran away without a hat, and so on.”⁵⁷

51 Kraševac, *Ivan Meštrović i secesija*, 41–67.

52 RZ NUK. Ms 1761. Fran Vesel’s legacy. Folder 114 (Arhiv društva Vesna), Committee session minutes of 19 November 1904.

53 Kraševac, *Ivan Meštrović i secesija*, 55.

54 RZ NUK. Ms 1761. Fran Vesel’s legacy. Folder 114 (Arhiv društva Vesna), General Assembly minutes of 9 May 1903.

55 RZ NUK. Ms 1761. Fran Vesel’s legacy. Folder 114 (Arhiv društva Vesna), General Assembly minutes of 1 December 1903.

56 See footnote 19.

57 RZ NUK. Inv. No. 13/2015. Maksim Gaspari’s correspondence. Meštrović to Gaspari, South Bend, 27 February 1958.

58 For more about this, see: Žerovc, “Ivan Meštrović u Ljubljani”.

59 *Ibid.*

60 *Ibid.* Almost certainly, the Vesna Society circle did not encourage Meštrović to exhibit in the Kazina in Ljubljana with the Hagenbund group in the autumn of 1904. However, it was through them that he could definitely become well-acquainted with the place. The exhibition in the Kazina took place after Meštrović’s break-up with the Vesna Society, which had not been amicable. Nonetheless, it is interesting that such an orientation of the exhibition venue did not seem to bother the young sculptor very much, as he displayed as many as six of his works there. During the first decade of the 20th century, Kazina conducted a well-planned and significant art exhibition programme. It hosted a series of art exhibitions by prominent artists’ associations from Graz and Vienna, such as the Hagenbund and Künstlerhaus. // Regarding the division between the Carniolans with the Slovenian and German national sense of identity in culture and art, and the role of the Kazina Society and other fine arts institutions in this situation of growing conflicts towards the end of the 19th century, see: Valant, “*Ljubljansko društvo Kazina*”, 189–191 et passim; Valant, Žerovc, “*Društva za likovno umetnost*”, 4–13.

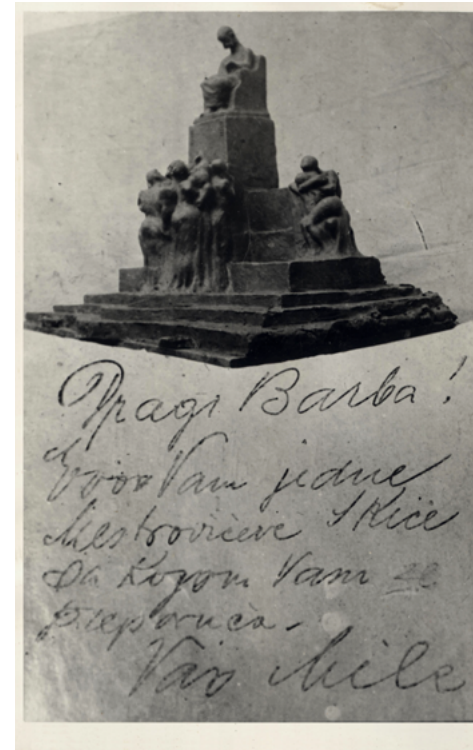
61 Bulimbašić, *Društvo hrvatskih umjetnika “Medulić”*, 135–161. It should be noted that the connections with the Vesna Society circle represent only a part of Meštrović’s Slovenian acquaintances in his early period. Among others, he was acquainted with Plečnik and almost certainly also Franc Berneker and Ivan Zajc, although it is difficult to determine the exact dates. Breščak, “*Stiki Ivana Zajca*”, 133–152; Mušič, *Jože Plečnik*, 118–128; Berdič, “*Meštrović in Slovenci*”, 29–35. His associations with the members of the Sava Artists’ Group took place a little later, but intensively at least as of 1904. See for example: Bulimbašić, *Društvo hrvatskih umjetnika “Medulić”*, 49–50.

CONCLUSION

In Meštrović’s memoirs, the Vesna Society may represent a group he socialised with rather than anything else. However, his connection to it and its members, both Croatian and Slovenian, deserves more attention than it currently receives. Not only did this circle introduce Meštrović to people who enabled him to expand his connections beyond the Society, but it was also through the Vesna members and discussions with them as well as in the framework of the Society that he familiarised himself with Carniola to the extent that he sold his early works there, made drafts for two monuments in Ljubljana — to Franz Joseph I in 1903 and to Jurij Vega in 1904 — and exhibited in the so-called Kazina (the Ljubljana Casino Society) in the autumn of 1904.⁵⁸ We can conclude that the Carniolan scene was, therefore, important to him at the beginning of his artistic career and that he was also relevant for Carniola. He contributed to modern sculptural tendencies in Carniola, while his exhibiting also touched upon the discussion on ugliness in art, which was topical in Austria at the time.⁵⁹

There are probably several reasons why Meštrović’s connections with the Vesna Society and Carniola have remained so imperceptible, and the oblivion is not only due to the insignificance of this “Vesna Society and Carniola episode” for the sculptor. First of all, it is worth mentioning that Meštrović participated in specific projects in Ljubljana that were not necessarily to the liking of the Slovenian patriots in Carniola. He even exhibited in the Kazina, which the latter, like the Slovenian-language media in Carniola at the time, perceived as the centre of the German-oriented Carniolan culture. Consequently, they practically ignored it, which is probably why part of the sculptor’s early activities in Carniola have also remained virtually “invisible” in the history of Slovenian art.⁶⁰ Since Meštrović’s actions in the abovementioned context were also far from what he would soon become — a great advocate of the Yugoslav idea and, two decades later, a prominent author of Yugoslav monuments celebrating the new state and the defeat of the former one — he himself was probably also reluctant to mention this part of his career and work, which presumably had an impact on the Croatian art history as well. Moreover, considering his remarkable further artistic career, his collaboration with the artistically unconvincing Vesna Society possibly sounded less than flattering, especially since, in 1904, he started to associate with the Slovenians whose status was closer to his — the members of the Sava Artists’ Group, headed by Jakopič. At the time, they were becoming crucial figures of the Slovenian fine arts milieu, just as Meštrović was becoming one on the Croatian fine arts scene. Thus, his extraordinary presence on the Slovenian scene simply continued elsewhere and with other allies. The Croatian Artists’ Society Medulić, associated with Meštrović, soon became the first non-local art group to exhibit in the newly constructed Jakopič Pavilion in 1909.⁶¹

The inclusion of the Vesna Society is also significant in this context, as some of its visible former Croatian members soon became prominent members of the Medulić Society — apart



Sl. / Fig. 8 Photograph of Ivan Meštrović’s draft of a monument to Franz Joseph I in Ljubljana from a postcard by an unknown sender to Ante Bezić in Split, 1 September 1903. Photo archive of the Fine Arts Archives at the Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts / Fotografija nacrta Ivana Meštrovića za spomenik Franji Josipu I. u Ljubljani s razglednice nepoznatog pošiljatelja Anti Beziću u Splitu, 1. rujna 1903. Fototeka Arhiva za likovne umjetnosti HAZU.



Sl. / Fig. 9 Photograph of the 1904 draft of a monument to Jurij Vega in Ljubljana by Ivan Meštrović. The Meštrović Gallery in Split. / Fotografija nacrta Ivana Meštrovića za spomenik Juriju Vegi u Ljubljani iz 1904. Galerija Meštrović Split.

from Meštrović, especially Mirko Rački and Tomislav Krizman. Even certain contradictions in the Medulić Society might be more understandable if we take this fact into account—for example, it is possible to discern an evident discomfort between Rašica and the abovementioned Croats in both Societies.⁶² Perhaps we can also consider this connection in light of the negative experiences attained by the former Vesna members who later joined the Medulić Society: for example, they realised which Society activities were pointless and ineffective, so they might have been able to improve them in the Medulić Society. However, we can also see this issue the other way around: the Vesna Society might have represented a positive model when we consider, for example, how and why the Medulić Society's system, rules, the presence of female artists, etc., resembled the Vesna Society.⁶³ Retrospectively, this comparative reflection is also vital for comprehending and interpreting the Vesna Society because Medulić's mode of action, despite the time gap, may be a demonstration of what the most ambitious Croatian members wanted to achieve already in the Vesna Society but were unable to because others, especially the Slovenians, opposed them. The extent to which the Slovenian Vesna members were appreciated by their Croatian colleagues who later joined the Medulić Society can also be seen from the following perspective: while the key Sava Group members—Jakopič, Grohar, and Jama, as well as the architect Plečnik—became members of the Medulić Society at the very beginning, Meštrović's fellow student from the Academy, Svetoslav Peruzzi, was the only Slovenian member of the Vesna Society who later joined the Medulić Society. He became a member in February 1911, not long after Meštrović had convinced him to move to Split to teach at the local Construction, Crafts and Art School.⁶⁴

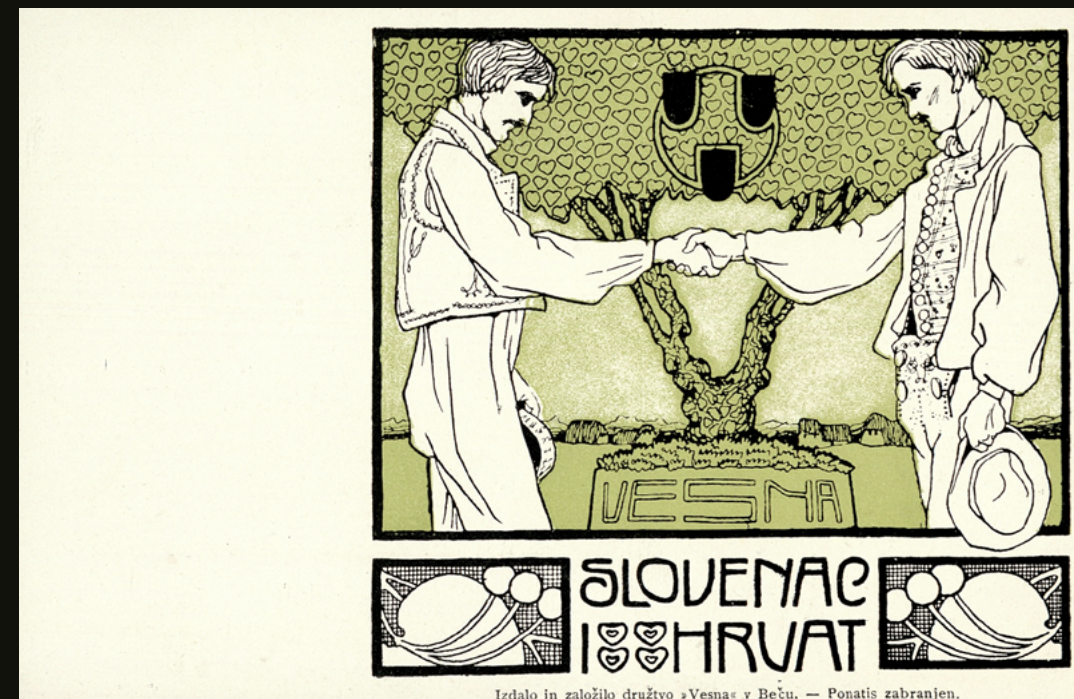
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Ibid., 80, 143.

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A similar observation could be made not just regarding the Medulić Society but also the Djelo group or some of Krizman's previous efforts, which represented the realisation of certain similar goals and activities that the Vesna Society had set out to achieve. The Vesna Society can again represent a positive or, on the contrary, a negative starting point for reflection. Other members of the Vesna Society, e.g. Kerdić and Rašica, also appear in the circle of the Djelo group; occasionally also Slovenians, e.g. Maksim Gaspari. Magaš Bilandžić, "Udruženje za promicanje", 292–307.

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Bulimbašić, *Društvo hrvatskih umjetnika "Medulić"*, 71.

Sl. / Fig. 10 Maksim Gaspari, postcard *Slovenac i Hrvat* [Slovenian and a Croat] from a series of postcards published by the Vesna Artists' Society at the end of 1903. Manuscript collection of the National and University Library, Ljubljana / Maksim Gaspari, razglednica *Slovenac i Hrvat* iz serije razglednica koju je izdalo umjetničko društvo Vesna krajem 1903. Rukopisna zbirka Narodne i univerzitetske knjižnice u Ljubljani.

↑

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