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FORGOTTEN: MIRKO KUS-NIKOLAJEV

A Contribution to an Early Theory on Folklore Visual Art Expression

The article presents papers by Mirko Kus-Nikolajev against the backdrop of the Croatian and, in part, European scholar production contemporary to them, dealing with the issues of folklore visual art expression. Particular attention is paid to the matter of defining folk art — peasant, ethnographic art.

Keywords: folklore visual art expression, Mirko Kus-Nikolajev

A look at the bibliographies of the early years of Croatian ethnology, both because of the large number of published titles and the scholarly intentions noted in such titles, would show another name in addition to Gavazzi's. The other name is that of Mirko Kus-Nikolajev, who was only a year younger than Gavazzi, and an ethnologist and sociologist. As mentioned in the bleak entry in the encyclopaedia, he studied natural sciences, geography and philosophy, and then ancient history and anthropology, earning his doctorate at the Zagreb Faculty of Philosophy, while from 1925 he was curator at the Ethnographic Museum in Zagreb (*Enciklopedija hrvatske umjetnosti* 1995; *Hrvatski leksikon* 1996).¹

Kus-Nikolajev's bibliography speaks of his interest in subjects far broader than those covered by the framework of the ethnological profession. He published at least as many papers in the field of anthropometry, biology, the sociology of culture, art and literature, and the like, as he did in ethnology. Where ethnology was his subject, he concentrated largely on the issue of folklore visual art expression, but also on questions of ethnomuseology and folk customs. However, Kus-

¹ His doctoral theme was entitled *The Psychological Problem of the Evolution and Biology of Vital Sequences* (*Filozofski fakultet Sveučilišta u Zagrebu. Monografija, Filozofski fakultet Sveučilišta u Zagrebu, Zagreb 1998.*).

-Nikolajev's papers left no particular mark in Croatian ethnology.² That fact prompted me to select a number of what I consider to be especially interesting papers and to try to present them against the background of the relevant Croatian and, partly, European scholarly production contemporary to them.

Ornaments: the heart and the tree of life

Kus-Nikolajev's papers dedicated to individual motifs of folk ornamentation should be observed within the framework of the cultural-historical methodological model: he selected the motifs of the Heart and the Tree of Life to provide answers to the questions of their origins, and tried to create a linked chain of their transformations in both form and semantics. He accepted the thesis by which the "West" adopted the "heart motif" from the Coptic monks, who had previously adopted it from the Egyptians (Kus-Nikolajev 1928b:2). He found its original sources in the bread loaves with heart motifs known in certain religious ceremonies, and in the ritual consumption of the human heart, connected with the belief that the strength and importance of the deceased passed to the heart's consumer. This also reminded him of the "designation" which "our folk also use" that "someone has a 'heroic' heart" (ibid.:3-4). He continued with the fact that, later, only the blood was drunk, while even later the "real" heart and the blood were decanted into symbols such as heart-shaped amulets, the colour red, and red flowers (ibid.) He concluded that "the use of the heart both as an ornament and in gingerbread" in Croatia "was introduced together with the Heart of Jesus cult at the time of the Counter-Reformation". He regarded this as a form which in a depleted form was adopted by Christianity from the ancient, pagan custom "and with time was instilled with new content" (ibid.:4-5).

When writing about the Tree of Life motif which appeared on the handicrafts which were the subject of his scientific interest much earlier than the heart motif, Kus-Nikolajev put the same questions in his research. However, the search for "transformation of form" in the sense of "degeneration" of this motif, in my opinion lead him a little too far:

The tree was the first to be stylised and this was done very early, because it was the first to lose its interpretation, that is the date fruit. This stylisation went at a fast rate so that soon all that was left were the decorative palm fronds, sometimes only the pedestal with birds clinging to it or birds beside it, while finally the tree was often lost altogether. All that was left was a vessel with the birds (...) Finally we find the last remnant of the Tree of Life and that is the vessel (...) In the same way (...) what remained was the tree alone or the birds alone, or one bird or

² When writing recently on ethnological thought in Croatia, Vitomir Belaj, for example, did not even mention him (Belaj 1996).

some other animal alone. The motif is found in a state of decomposition (Kus-Nikolajev 1930a:40, 48-49).

The demands of methodology here have transcended the "actuality" of the material, and it would seem that the fulfilment of the task which imposed *a priori* and imperative formation of a series of "degenerative changes" became the only point of reference for scholarly quality. This seems to have been present to such a degree that Kus-Nikolajev's vision of the "decomposition" of the complex Tree of Life motif was also accompanied by motifs which were autonomous, independent of it, and almost certainly preceded it (such as "the tree alone", "one bird", or "some other animal"). We would also be more inclined to identify the motif of the chalice flanked by doves as an iconographic motif of the source of life.³ True enough, it is possible to establish the connection between the "Tree of Life" (*arbor vitae*) and Catholicism in the formal, and even semantic proximity of this motif and the Old Testament Tree of Knowledge with comprehension of Good and Evil, replaced in Christianity by the Cross, but that connection was not, in any case, relevant to Kus-Nikolajev's subject matter.⁴ Almost automatically, one is led to a comparison between Kus-Nikolajev's Tree of Life and the article written in the same year by Milovan Gavazzi, devoted to the subject of the "Swastika motif" on Easter eggs. Gavazzi's interest in the Swastika motif dated at the latest from 1924, when the article entitled *From our Folk Art (Decorated Easter Eggs)* appeared in the *Vijenac* magazine (Gavazzi 1924). At that early juncture, he indicated that the meaning of this motif/symbol "ranges (...) around the symbol of the *life force*" which, he claimed, "coincides extraordinarily with the significance of the egg" which "in the customs and beliefs of almost all peoples has (...) a special place" because "it carries out its task as a representation of the life force and the sprouts of life" (*ibid.*:240, 243). He elaborated on the theme five years later, in the meantime adopting the interpretation of the meaning of the Swastika from Karl von den Steinen, who saw its origins in the stylisation of the image of the stork, while he found the origin of the three-branched figure, similar to a Swastika, in the simplified representation of a rooster. Gavazzi found this plausible and even unquestionable because of the undeniable connection between birds and the egg, so he rejected other theories, including those which without "sufficient persuasiveness" interpreted the figure of the Swastika as a stylisation of flint or as a schematisation of the Sun and, even its

³ These are iconographic motifs which show deer, peacocks, and other animals which drink from the source of a kantharos, a chalice, or even from an architectural representation of a well. This motif was commonly used for illuminating Psalm 42: *As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after Thee, O God.* (...)

⁴ It is interesting to note that the Cross in mediaeval Christian iconography once again, in some cases, took the form of a tree (*Leksikon ikonografije, liturgike i simbolike zapadnog kršćanstva* 1979).

revolutions (ibid.).⁵ Gavazzi's interpretation also leads us to believe that he was unaware of the fact that figures he called Swastikas, and particularly those he called modified Swastikas, are also found on other objects of traditional handicrafts such as, for example, costumes (in the northern Dalmatian hinterland), distaffs, bread-oven slides, ceramic plates, and the like. It is possible, of course, that he thought that the motifs in question were adopted solely from those very Easter eggs, and that is why he did not mention them. However, he must have known that the same motifs decorate and/or designate a plate dating from the early Neolithic found at the Smilčići site, artefacts found on Illyrian localities, the upright *stećak* tombstones from Vrlika and Cista, wayside funeral procession *mirila* resting stones...

Gavazzi also continued his search for a "series of gradual changes" in the Swastika which would uncover "continued developmental lines, along which this figure developed as an ornament" (Gavazzi 1930:309). Consequently, in addition to the four-branched Swastika with its branches crooked at a right angles or rounded, Gavazzi saw the modification of this figure in "doubled or halved forms", and even in those "without hooks". We would more probably call the latter an (ordinary) Cross, without connecting it in any way with the Swastika, which would definitely be plausible if we were to take into account the occasion (Easter) for which they were used as decoration.⁶ In this paper of Gavazzi's, equally as in

⁵ "The only thing which can be postulated without doubt and with justification from all the hypotheses is: that the connection between the rooster and the hen (chicken) and the triskelion and Swastika on decorated Easter eggs, as their visual art representations, is more probable than all of the other hypotheses of the source and meaning of these figures. This is nearer to reality, without the need for a deeper magical apparatus and psychological conjectures" (Gavazzi 1930:310-312).

When considering the issue of the origins of the Swastika motif/symbol, the two theories mentioned — which were rejected by Gavazzi — definitely belong to the group of the most ubiquitous and readily accepted theories among the scholarly public. On the other hand, I have not encountered von den Steinen's theory in the work of other authors (Senjković 1991). It is obvious that Gavazzi was not aware of the extensive literature which dealt with the Swastika motif, particularly of Thomas Wilson's book which dealt exclusively with this motif and was published as early as 1896.

⁶ Thomas Wilson, probably the greatest authority on the issue of the Swastika motif, in his comparison with the Cross, together with the straight lines, circles, and triangle motifs, explained his disagreement with the theories of "the multiple invention" of the Swastika. He called them "simple forms" which could have emerged at any time in pre-history and in any part of the world, while the Swastika was "probably the first to be made with a definite intention and a continuous or consecutive meaning, the knowledge of which passed from person to person, from tribe to tribe, from people to people, and from nation to nation, until, with possibly changed meanings, it has finally circled the globe" (Wilson 1896:764).

The Gavazzi text referred to also resulted in fairly numerous, but, as a rule, uncritical reverberations in later Croatian ethnological literature. To mention only the earliest example I know of, in 1933 Antun Matasović identified a Swastika in a figure which "had lost its original shape" and consisted of "four protruding and four hollowed-out right-angled triangles, the hypotenuse on some facing right, and left on the others" (Matasović 1933:19).

Kus-Nikolajev's dealing with the Tree of Life motif, method, but not ethnographic material itself, conditioned the results of their scholarly undertakings, while the commentary of the authors' theses could lead us to the absurd: we would be equally justified, for example, in asking why the sole bird which remained in Kus-Nikolajev's Tree of Life "degeneration" theory, would not be closer to the figure from which Gavazzi derived the origins of the Swastika, instead of being an ancient symbol of life's struggle.

The symbolic character of peasant art

Karl von den Steinen, the scholar who established that the stork came first, and then the Swastika, also read Mirko Kus-Nikolajev, in whose paper published in 1935 there is an evident acceptance of the thesis which Gavazzi also found so attractive.⁷ For his part, Kus-Nikolajev emphasised that peasant art has symbolic character, because "the emphasis in the artistic creations of the peasant lies in — ornament", while the ornament is not a mere decoration — as it also was not for Max Schlesinger, who concentrated on questions associated with the history of symbols, and who, probably not by chance, was a devotee of Karl von den Steinen. For the Croatian ethnologist, ornament was "a means of expression, an effort to give visible form to certain spiritual moods and feelings" (ibid.:26; Kus-Nikolajev 1929a:3).⁸ That was why he criticised Gottfried Semper, claiming that the latter's interpretation of the origins of the ornament "from the technical conditions of its construction" was obsolete (Kus-Nikolajev 1935:39), without trying, however, to use in his argumentation the observations of Riegl and Boas that geometrical ornamentations are frequently linked to meaning and the names of "tangible objects" by "many tribes throughout the world" (Boas 1927:89).⁹ As far as Kus-

⁷ "The papers of Karl von den Steinen are equally important for the ethnological method of research into ornament: It developed by tradition from concrete copying — and unceasingly moved on in the artistic sense from the original, and under the influence of the method of work and the working material, [in] stylised works of art which in the spirit of the Indians were closely connected with the old model. In this way, simple forms such as the triangle and the rectangle — which were believed to have been freely constructed by primitive artists — emerged only by stylisation of the models (...)" (Kus-Nikolajev 1935:30).

⁸ Schlesinger found the origins of ornaments in "simple, conventional and reduced copying" of subjects from Nature "deriving multifariously and independently from the spirit of diverse peoples" (Schlesinger 1967:347-403). The end result of this "process", the unidentifiability of the original form (the actual subject), is a consequence of adaptation of its already simplified form to the laws of the frame which it fills. Schlesinger believed that the symbolic content of the ornament derived precisely from the characteristics and meanings which are associated with the original form, the subject from Nature. The premise stated in this way unavoidably leads to a conclusion which rejects the decorative role of the ornament (ibid.).

⁹ Neither Alois Riegl nor Franz Boas could have deduced the thesis from the observations mentioned. The theory on the development of the form from realism towards

-Nikolajev was concerned, no differentiation existed between "the relationship towards an object created artistically" among "Neolithic man" and the peasant (Kus-Nikolajev 1929a:3-4). The symbols by which both express themselves in art are reflexive, and are consequently "ornamental and develop either by the sliding of the naturalistic composition into the geometrical, that is, continuous stressing of a smaller number of essential features, or by independent linear representation of specific conceptual qualities" (Kus-Nikolajev 1935:27). Neither Early Stone Age man nor the peasant see "the bare object", but "so to say, the problem of that object", so that the content of the objects becomes the content of the art (Kus-Nikolajev 1929a:4). To Kus-Nikolajev, they are both expressionists, so that their visual art expression differs from the visual art expression of the Palaeolithic hunter and scavenger, whose symbols are "reproductive", and thus "naturalistic" (Kus-Nikolajev 1935:27). This dichotomy seemed to him to be particularly important, not only because he noted that "the issue of the ornament in ethnology (...) is young" and that "only young ethnologists devote direct attention to it", endeavouring to study its form and content "as part of their own science, neither borrowing the issue nor the method from other sciences, particularly from the history of art and practical aesthetics", but also because he considered that the perceptions ethnologists arrived at by studying ornaments could to a considerable extent contribute to the theory of art history itself (ibid.:28-29).¹⁰ He observed that Neolithic and "timeless" peasant art expressionism would repeat itself "in Romanesque and Gothic art, in the art of Byzantium, in the art of the African Negroes, the peoples of Oceania and Indonesia, and among some of the American Indians" (Kus-Nikolajev 1931:6).¹¹ The

conventionalism (from the mimetic to the non-mimetic) — made logical by derivation of the statement "from the field" was questionable even to Boas, leaving room for diametrically opposed assumptions on alterations of form (Boas 1927:89). On his part, Riegl amplified his reservations with different reasons: "Since travellers report fairly uniformly that what seem to us to be geometrical ornaments i.e. crystalline motifs for filling in space, are called by the names of organic objects by natives. Thus, for example, New Zealanders. And this is the impression of classic archaeologists (...) Series of triangles are a series of bats. Series of squares are bees in flight. If that is correct, then it should be said: natives immediately organise organic objects in strict crystalline form, and that is not bad, and seems to me to be fully acceptable. But there is one shortcoming: we in the 19th century cannot know what those Indians were thinking a few centuries ago" (Riegl 1969:13).

¹⁰ "It is true, for today's historians of art expecting familiarity with prehistoric and ethnographic art is often an insurmountable difficulty, since the methods of art history are still inapplicable to primitive art, which did not produce its 'constant' style and which moved according to its own rules in constant variation and recasting (...) But that is why study of prehistoric and ethnographic art gives completely new insights into the question of the emergence and development of style" (Kus-Nikolajev 1931:5).

¹¹ In that way, prehistoric art, as did its direct heir and continuer, ethnographic art, gives an insight into the very oldest expressions of art, connecting them in their development and style trends right up until the historical era. It was on this basis that our completely different conception of art was founded, which was until then restricted within the moulds of older artistic and historical arbitrariness" (Kus-Nikolajev 1931:6).

models of the mentioned dichotomy of naturalism/expressionism are in Verworn's physioplastic/ideoplastic style and Kühn's sensuous imaginative style, which Kus-Nikolajev himself emphasised. What is in question is the effort to seek out unifying principles for diverse areas of culture, whose starting-points lie in Hegel's philosophy. If he only could have known about Kus-Nikolajev's claims, Ernst Gombrich would probably have been able with ease to draw the line between the above-mentioned pre-historian, Herbert Kühn, and the much more famous Heinrich Wölfflin, whom he criticised precisely because he introduced "observation of facts" into "the flows of *a priori* thought which arranges the picture of the historical process" (according to Bialostocki 1986:88).

The expressiveness of peasant art or — as he wrote on one occasion — "more precisely (...) peasant ornamentation" is the core thesis of Kus-Nikolajev's papers: he deduced from it all other theses dealing with folklore visual art expression.

With the impoverishment of the village, when, compelled by circumstances, handicrafts became the products of home-industry they lost their integrity and their artistic originality, and became copies. Lovely copies, but lacking inner expression. Their function ceased at the moment at which they were no longer a integral part of the life and customs of the peasants (Kus-Nikolajev 1937a:185).

This very strict statement — by which Kus-Nikolajev "if we take him at his word", prevented himself from taking advantage of field research — once again reminds us of Alois Riegl (1858-1905), one of the most significant representatives of the so-called "Vienna school" in the science of art history, and a pioneer in the field of formal analysis of art works. His claim that folk art belonged solely and exclusively to the domestic activity and domestic workshops of peasants who themselves produced and decorated practical objects for their own use was the subject of wide criticism. If one were to assess the firmness and steadfastness of Kus-Nikolajev's scholarly postulates by Riegl's scale, then it would be necessary to mention that Riegl, like Kus-Nikolajev later, opposed the "technical and technological" theory of ornamentation which invoked Semper's authority:

Riegl planned to reject that materialism, that neglect of aesthetic and psychological stimuli which lies at the core of artistic creativity, by presentation of its thousand-year development (Gombrich 1984:193).¹²

¹² As Riegl "studied the vicissitudes of the lotus turning itself successively into the palmette, the acanthus and the arabesque, he began to think of it as if it were endowed with a life and will of its own. Thus we read that Hellenistic art brought the Greek scroll to the end towards which it had been consistently driving for centuries, or that it was its essential aim to unfold freely over large areas. In other words, he was more a Lamarckian than a Darwinist, or more precisely an Aristotelian who thought in terms of a 'final cause'. That 'will to art', which Riegl had conceived as an alternative to the mechanistic

Riegl's concept of folk art has an economic foundation, just as Kus-Nikolajev's does: namely, according to Kus-Nikolajev altered social and economic relations led to the "extinction of the multiple family household [the *zadruga*]", and that fact, for its part, altered the "mental disposition" from which peasant art emerged and the basis on which it lived (Kus-Nikolajev 1929b:57). For that reason, the same criticism could be directed at Kus-Nikolajev as was directed at Riegl by a much younger German colleague, Arnold Hauser, who said: "In advance, he excludes from folk art everything which has some learnt handicraft or craft character and makes no mention of peasant house-building (...)", and also everything produced for the people, without devoting "enough attention (...) to the circumstances of consumption" (Hauser 1977:237-238). However, it should be remembered that Hauser differentiated peasant from folk art — to him, peasant art was the same as primitive art was to Kus-Nikolajev:

One could speak of peasant art and peasant culture only to the point when peasants are factors of that culture, as they no doubt were in the Neolithic and at the time of the Great Migrations, while folk art, to the contrary, only from the time when, beside folk art, which certainly consisted largely of peasant art, there also existed the art of the gentlefolk (*ibid.*:239).¹³

The strict and static definition of folk art which Kus-Nikolajev assigned to Croatian ethnology was valid for a very short time: already in 1944, Gavazzi added "craftsman peasant art" to "authentic peasant art", since:

The objects of peasant craftsman art are manufactured by village craftsmen themselves, they are intended for sale to peasants who wear or use them as something of their own, inherited, and peasant. Therefore this craftsman peasant art (...) cannot be completely separated from the first. They are mutually connected and to an extent influence each other (Gavazzi 1944:V).

On the other hand, it should be stated that Kus-Nikolajev did not adhere consistently to his statement. It could, admittedly, be thought that he had no intention of writing about folk art, when compiling his iconological analysis of the painting of St. Kümerniss from the Chapel of St. Barbara in Velika Mlaka near Zagreb. He does not directly explain this in the article, and it even occurred to him that "in all likelihood it was the work of a consistent German" (Kus-Nikolajev 1929d:88). Still, as far as he was concerned, the very "appearance of St. Kümerniss" was ethnologically

explanations of individual motifs, developed into a vitalistic principle underlying the whole history of art" (Gombrich 1984:193).

¹³ In addition, Hauser would question the continuity of "artistic aspiration" — this term having been introduced into the science of art history by Riegl — which produced the geometric nature of Neolithic art: "The geometricism of peasant art shows, admittedly, Neolithic character, but peasant art, as we know, is not simply identical with folk art, the historical continuity of that geometricism cannot be proven, even in regard to peasant art" (Hauser 1977:245).

relevant, if observed "from the perspective of cultural remnants in peasant art" (ibid.:89). He wrote "It is often also unconscious, a composite part of the primitivised cult of saints among peasants, and submerged to a full extent in peasant painting of the saints (...)" in which "we find several typical 'rustified' saints such as Sts. Rocchus, James, Leonhard, and the like". Their "cults" were maintained "although altered and augmented, often having no connection with their origins, but regularly deeply rooted in the spiritual sphere of the peasant, where the cults contained certain elements of a particular way of thinking, which had lost all meaning among the active historical classes" (ibid.).

Without doubt, Kus-Nikolajev was well aware that the painting of the saints of which he wrote, which hung on the walls of peasant houses, were not painted by the householders themselves, but by special and even specialised masters. Still, he devoted another paper to this theme, and asserted that in northern Croatia — in Podravina particularly — and in its western regions — especially in Gorski Kotar — as late as 1937, when he wrote the article in question, "one can see paintings on glass in peasant houses" (Kus-Nikolajev 1937b:79). However, he did comment that they were starting to disappear because of the fact that their production had ceased "primarily in Slovenia, whence they were brought to these regions" since, according to the information he managed to collect, "the practice of painting on glass did not exist in Croatia" (ibid.). He also blamed the competition from "cheap paper picture" for their "decline", and on the fact, which must be emphasised, that the paper pictures "were 'liked' more by the peasant than the previous paintings on glass" (ibid.:80). For him, no longer were craft-produced pictures proof of the new (but still) "taste", but pictures on paper which "appeared in connection with the new relations in life" originating "under the influence of the new economic and social forms of the town" (ibid.:83). This change, although it was not elaborated upon, could be regarded as some sort of turning-point which occurred in Kus-Nikolajev's thinking between 1935 and 1937, and one could then wonder if it was conditioned by domestic or foreign scholarly and extra-scholarly stimuli. However, in that case, the question of the article written earlier, in 1928, would remain unsolved. There, too, Kus-Nikolajev did not enter into definition of the concept of folk art, but preferred to concentrate on the gingerbread heart, manufactured by village craftsmen, makers of gingerbread. He even mentioned that "recently, various small pieces of paper with expressions of love have been pasted (...) onto the hearts" (Kus-Nikolajev 1928b:5).

Collectivity *versus* individualism

A question which was almost equally important to ethnologists as the definition itself of the concept of folk art — even though folklorists devoted more time to it — was the assigning of a place to a subject of scholarly interest on a scale in which the sign of collectivism was at the

very "bottom", while the "top" indicated individuality, followed in this connection by the question of the relation between folk and "elevated, artistic" art. Riegl, who has been mentioned above, dealt with these questions; for him the "types" of art were incomparable: folk art was merely something which (simply) came into being, while high art was something which was "intended" (Riegl 1894, according to: Hauser 1977:237). Here, too, Kus-Nikolajev would be equally strict:

One of the most obvious characteristics of peasant art — as well as primitive art — lies in its collective artistic expression. The aesthetic 'ideal' is common to entire ethnic groups and is not indulged in individually, but collectively. Peasant art is art which is 'social art' *par excellence*. The artistic disposition of the individual does not come into the foreground in creation of the artistic form, but only possibly in its barely perceptible development. That is why it is out of place to speak of any individual artistic taste of the peasants. That taste is traditional and connected with the entire community in the same way as are custom, legal instruments and the like (Kus-Nikolajev 1929a:2).

Although Kus-Nikolajev speaks of "the artistic disposition of the individual" being responsible for what he characterises as "barely visible" but, nonetheless, "development" of the artistic forms, this small concession to individualism in Croatian ethnology was to be "increased" again by Milovan Gavazzi.

Gavazzi would emphasise that the notions of peasant art's collective nature, and individuality of "artistic" art belonging to "the so-called high civilisation", "do not strike at their essence" (Gavazzi 1944:VI). He also notes that "artistic" art is also collective to an extent, since an artist "builds" his work "on some basis of tradition of the generations before him", so that he "often pays heed to the taste, aspirations, and inclinations of his environment". Gavazzi goes on to say that ethnographic art is also individual to a large extent, since new creations arise "from the stimulus of inner creative aspirations of the individual", and are then accepted by the collective "(or are, in some cases, rejected), (...) repeated, improved by repetition (or sometimes spoiled), augmented and expanded (or impaired and constricted), linked with other known similar creations" (ibid.:VII). Hauser, who devoted the fifth of the six chapters of his *Philosophy of the History of Art* to folk and popular art, stated the same. Although high art to Hauser was that type of art "which always means an accounting with the problems of life and the struggle to find the meaning of survival" — while folk art is "barely anything other than a game and ornament" — still:

The most individual, most capricious, and most original artist, too, moves within the borders of tradition and convention; he cannot always do the work he wants to do, moreover, he cannot even aspire in the way he would like to. He concurs in the fundamental principles of his art with others and creates his works largely for one and the same public — in any case, he is guided by the ideas of that public in his creations (Hauser 1977:231-235).

Kus-Nikolajev's materialism

Of what nature is the connection between art and the idea, between the idea and historical, social, political and economic reality? As we have seen, Kus-Nikolajev believed in their mutually conditioned state, while in interpretation he inclined to the materialistic concept in the abrogation of folk art: "It has to be borne in mind", he wrote

that the further the process of the modernisation of the Croatian village advances, the more evident the dying out of peasant art. This is a process which is conditioned by the changed economic structure of the village and it cannot be held back by any means. This dying away is the consequence of historical necessity, of a economic transformation. The conditions of life of peasant art are tied to economic forms (...) Peasant art live and dies with those economic forms (Kus-Nikolajev 1935:17).

He tried to answer the same question in a somewhat different way in an article in which he elaborated the consequences which, in his opinion, were caused in peasant art by the Counter-Reformation:

The entire phenomenon of the Counter-Reformation should be reduced to a totally altered mental disposition, which was created on altered social and economic relations (...) In those new relations in which the art of the Counter-Reformation was the most evident feature, culturally speaking, there are a series of cultural and social components which the Church of Rome skilfully utilised for its own purposes, just as it did art. That is all; but art itself did not grow out of specific needs of the Church, but from new cultural and social relations, which went beyond art and the life of the Renaissance (ibid.:57).

And further:

That psychological disposition is important, in order also to understand that immense influence which the Baroque wrought on the peasant art of almost all the peoples of Europe (ibid.:58).

According to Kus-Nikolajev, economic misery, spiritual resignation, and depression dominated the end of the Renaissance period. The religious mood, which was less steadfast for those reasons, had to be reinforced with new ideas which would elevate the thoughts and hopes of the common man "into a higher sphere of self-denial of vital, personal impulses" (ibid.:58). Jesuitry became the standard-bearer of such ideas which, wrote Kus-Nikolajev, modelled spiritual life all "according to the one mould", to which "art served as decoration, as the visible characteristic and indicator of its content" (ibid.:59). He continued:

That was a narcotic art which was given vent from the aristocratic courts to the Baroque masters of the urban guilds. As a wave, it covered with the uniformity of its tenets the agitated social environment of its time, penetrating deeper and deeper, until the last tendrils of the Baroque were drawn into peasant art (ibid.:60).

Today, a major part of the Humanities has abandoned the division of the last millennium into parts of two centuries each, then calling them the Romanesque, the Gothic, the Renaissance, and the Baroque, and also the study of works of art which were created in such tidily ordered sequences of time as if they were nothing other than mere consequences of a pre-defined concept — which had to explain them. Consequently, from today's point of view, Kus-Nikolajev's overarching of certain motifs, as well as their "composition" in folklore visual art expression by the term Baroque, would at least be questionable. It was only in fact during the 1960s, however, that at closer and consistently critical look was taken at studying "assumed laws", which had to identify a cyclical flow of styles and their typology, together with what had, until then, been the almost unquestionable theses of Riegl and Wölfflin, and the great volumes of art reviews entitled according to chronological or fully historical and even topographical concepts.¹⁴

¹⁴ For example, in 1967 Lorenz Dittman, contrary to Riegl's and Wölfflin's maximalistic theories, suggested a minimalistic and pluralistic system of categories. He called them

The doubts which hounded the criticised Wölfflin himself, prove that things are not always as simple as they might be. He put himself a question which will be particularly interesting to us:

What type of connection (...) can exist between the Gothic style, feudalism and scholastics? Which bridge can link the Baroque with the ideology of the Jesuits? (ibid.:90).

Still, even if one takes into account all these subsequent doubts, some of Kus-Nikolajev's observations on the reasons and causes for the overlaying of the "cultural" on, according to this author's written thesis, relatively rigid structured folk art and, concretely, the reasons and causes for the "success" which the "Baroque" achieved in quite specific regions of Croatia would be instructive even today. Kus-Nikolajev noticed the difference between the "unwieldy and disproportional" Baroque which was the result of the "Baroque infection" in those parts of Europe in which "autochthonous folk art no longer existed at the time when the Baroque came to life", and, on the other hand, the corresponding situation in Croatia. In his words,

while the peasant art of western peoples poured into its art almost all the elements of the Baroque, for the very reason that it lacked an indigenous creative side, our peasant art in which the inborn force remained preserved, absorbed only those motifs which it could develop and bring to life in ornament (ibid.:63).¹⁵

This "inborn force" of Croatian folk art, according to Kus-Nikolajev, was hidden in its "primitivism" which "remained preserved" (ibid.:63). He also noted that this "absorbed" and "developed" European Baroque was most

ideal types and thought of them as corresponding to the diversity of art phenomena (Bialostocki 1986:49).

In 1962, in his book *The Shape of Time*, Georg Kubler also argued against the common conception of style as expression or a symptom, which would only with the Enlightenment and Romanticism be expanded to cover large entities, such as the individual periods and epochs. (*The Shape of Time, Remarks on the History of Things*, New Haven - London 1962.) On the trail of Fernand Braudel (*Histoire et sciences sociales: la longue durée, Annales Économies, Sociétés Civilisations*, XIII, 1958, No. 4:725-753) although, it would seem, without reading it, Kubler proposed concentration on the visual aspect, on the morphology of the phenomena, applying "methodological thought based on the results of anthropology, sociology and archaeology" (according to Bialostocki 1986:60). He postulated "the passing of time in the form of fibrous bundles in which each fibre represents a particular need which is realised in a separate field of activity and where the length of the fibre changes in dependence on the duration of each need and in accordance with the solutions deriving from such problems, so that the bundles of culture consist of fibres of continued, largely long-term events and many short-term ones. Such fibres are mainly tied together by chance and only in exceptional cases can we find in them conscious thought or precise planning" (ibid.:61).

¹⁵ Here, Kus-Nikolajev speaks out indirectly about his conception of the indigenous in peasant art. Thus, he found it in "primitivism", although it is not quite clear what he understood by the concept. In one of his other papers, we find only indications of his possible definition. Primarily, what is in question is the criticism he directed towards his art historian contemporaries, which I have already mentioned in this article.

successfully "grafted" on to the matrix of that Croatian peasant art which had already been "infected" by the equally flourishing forms and colours, and, often, where types of material were concerned, equally selective art of the Orient (ibid.:67-68).

Conclusion

Mirko Kus-Nikolajev as he presented himself in the less than ten years of his most intensive scholarly activity, could almost be said to have adhered alternatively to "'historical, ideographic' thought which postulates 'actual and factual statements'", and then to the "'theoretical, nomotetic' which postulates 'general states searching for laws'" (Prca 1996a:63). In so doing, when he enters onto the area of the first, he makes us think that he was familiar with the iconographic method which, in any case, does research within the framework of cultural-historical scholarly thought. We are led to this assumption primarily by his article "The Painting of St. Kümerniss at Velika Mlaka", in which the author extracts the motif of preserved maidenhood from the variants of the St. Kümerniss legends known to him, then searching for the structural elements of the legends, proving the connection between St. Kümerniss and "Volto Santo", which shows Christ dressed in a tunic on the crucifix;¹⁶ St. Kümerniss and the legend of the three virgins, Ainbeth, Warbeth and Wilbeth; St. Kümerniss and the cults of other saints, particularly St. Leonhard, etc. (Kus-Nikolajev 1930b). However, the reason for this legend being interesting to ethnologists is shown at the end of the article, where he relies once again on the claim already known to us, actually the "commonplace" of his articles. He wrote:

Culturally and historically the phenomenon of St. Kümerniss is of great interest. This is especially so if its appearance is observed from the perspective of cultural remnants in peasant art (...) it is submerged in full measure in peasant painting of the saints from cultural art and that, it would seem, at the time of the Counter-Reformation, when the religious tenets of the village were strengthened by new spiritual manifestations (ibid.:89).

As happened with the cults of St. Kümerniss, St. Rocchus, St. James and St. Leonhard, Kus-Nikolajev concluded that many other "saint cults"

were retained (...) among the peasants, although changed and augmented, often without any connection with their origins, but regularly deeply rooted in the spiritual sphere of the peasants, conserving among them

¹⁶ "Pictures of St. Kümerniss almost always show a *gusle*-player — often along with a chalice. This representation of a musician is connected with the legend that Volto Santo had saved him from death by throwing him a slipper. This legend is encountered again in connection with St. Kümerniss. The latter also has several variations. In one case it concerns the healing of a blind *gusle*-player, in another, the music played by him which was so lovely that it raised a virgin from the dead" (Kus-Nikolajev 1930b:87).

elements of a particular world-view, which had lost its meaning among the active historical classes (*ibid.*).

One can uncover elements of iconographic analyses in Kus-Nikolajev's observation of the Heart and the Tree of Life motifs. For his part, Gavazzi did not pay much attention to the reasons for "variations" in the Swastika motifs which he chose to research, mentioning in the manner of Semper, the technique of their execution as the cause of the rounding off of the otherwise sharp branches of the Swastika on Easter eggs. However, Kus-Nikolajev tried to understand the causes for the "dispersion" and "degeneration" of the Tree of Life motif and to register the influences which contributed to its alterations. On the other hand, if we were to conceive the iconographic method as a manifestation of an idea which showed the way for injecting "revitalising" juices into the somewhat weary body of scholarship on art history by utilising the interdisciplinary approach, as was established in 1912 by Aby Warburg, the founder of this method, then we would not find any similarity in Kus-Nikolajev's works.

Still, Kus-Nikolajev did make an explicit plea for the interdisciplinary approach — unlike Gavazzi's ethnological/philological approach, well-known to the Humanities from as early as Renaissance times — supporting the use of sociological methods in art — generally, and then specifically "ethnologically". This leads us to think that Kus-Nikolajev could have been familiar with the European social and humanist scholarly literature of his time, for example, the works by the historians Marc Block and Lucien Febvre, who pleaded in 1928 for the elimination of the borders between disciplines, wanting to be able to encompass all the entirety of historical processes. He could even have known — at least indirectly — the work of Aby Warburg, the German art historian who two decades earlier "had been (...) one of the first to take into account the social conditioning of art phenomena and who rejected the idea of an autonomous world of art and who took into account in research the different visual messages of each genre" firmly believing that "images" could not be understood

without constant reference to the history of philosophy, ideology and religion, nor without study of the social and political situation (Bialostocki 1986:00-100).¹⁷

We have seen that Kus-Nikolajev's theses were not on the whole at all "revolutionary" — and would perhaps regard some of them as being conservative — and are often also contradictory in their realisation. Therefore, invoking Kus-Nikolajev's famous European contemporaries could well seem pretentious, even more so because familiarity with the originals should have, it would seem, been able to result in more intriguing themes or more intriguing implementations. Nonetheless, when speaking of the themes themselves, we have to conclude that, in his selection of them, Mirko Kus-Nikolajev differed from the remainder of the Croatian ethnology of his time. In that way he at least came a little closer to the best relevant European work. In other words, while Kus-Nikolajev's Croatian ethnology contemporaries were engaged in detailed descriptions of "the ethnological individuum" ("ethnological units") and research into its "region of dissemination", compared with "analogous phenomena elsewhere" and discovering the paths and ways "how (in the past) ethnographic content of such individuums was created, developed and changed, how it was enriched — or how it became impoverished and withered", Kus-Nikolajev tried in several of his papers "to understand the peasant from within", in the very place in which, after all, everything he produced came into being (Gavazzi 1928:115).¹⁸ These efforts on the part of Kus-Nikolajev brought him closer to Radić and the very inception of Croatian ethnology (which, unfortunately, as was shown later, did not persist in its adherence to Radić's principles — see in: Prica 1996b:265-284), although still not near to Radić's view of the people as "their own best ethnographer". This point of departure led Kus-Nikolajev to select broader units of issues in such a way that they made him the odd man out in the Croatian ethnology of his time, and then to analyse them in a non-Gavazzi manner, presenting himself as an author with an inclination towards textualisation of ideas to such an extent that, considering

¹⁷ Or, more clearly, in the words in which Warburg concluded the report on his research into the meaning of frescoes painted by Francesco Cossa and his associates in the Schifanoia Palace in Ferrara, which Warburg delivered to the International Congress of Art Historians held in Rome in 1912: "I hope that I have shown, demonstrating the method I used in deciphering the frescoes at the Schifanoia Palace in Ferrara, that iconological analysis — which dares to analyse works of the freest art, along with works of the most applied art, as expressive documents on an equal footing — — endeavouring to illuminate a dark spot, at the same time casts light on great mutually connected developmental sequences" (Bialostocki 1986:101)

¹⁸ Gavazzi's ethnographic individuum (the ethnological unit) designates "detached estates of material, social or spiritual culture", "closely linked groups" of such individual properties, but, primarily limited "ethnographic complexes" (Gavazzi 1928:115).

especially his introductory observations, we would regard his style as an essayistic one.¹⁹

In conclusion, we would like to be able to understand the reasons for Mirko Kus-Nikolajev's "disappearance" from Croatian ethnology, both in the sense of active engagement in (ethnological) scholarship (after 1940, his articles were published exclusively outside of Croatia), and in the sense of the scholarly heritage which, as we have seen, he passed on. It could be that part of the answer to the second question can be found in otherwise somewhat unattractive "quotation inertia", while the second part of this answer, together with the answer to the first question should be sought elsewhere, outside scholarship itself, in an environment less pleasant than the one (narrowly) enclosed within the world of science, where research results in cognition, while the other in mere scholarly papers.²⁰

¹⁹ Something by the way could be added to this statement: Kus-Nikolajev did not shrink from declaring himself personally in his papers. "Of course, no calculation of those forms and content in our peasant art has been concluded to date, so that these lines must be regarded as **my subjective perception** which it will be possible to verify only by further research" (Kus-Nikolajev 1929a:2, emphasis R. S.)

²⁰ Only a few days after I handed this article in to the editors of the *Croatian Journal of Ethnology and Folklore Research*, two articles were received, written by Dolores Ivanuša from the Croatian Historical Museum. They confirm the assumptions from the end of this article, which are based on a fairly uninformative sentence in the *Croatian Lexicon*: "Charged several times and imprisoned for activities 'against the people and the state'" (*Croatian Lexicon* 1996). I learned from Ivanuša's papers that Kus-Nikolajev's life was indeed determined to a considerable extent by his political views. His first prison sentence for supporting "the cultural and political unification into one independent state of all the Southern Slavs" was served in Zenica [B-H] between 1915 and 1917 (Kus-Nikolajev, according to Ivanuša 1999:225). Later: "In his discourses as in a series of smaller articles, he expressed his anti-Fascist commitment, while at the same time unmasking Bolshevism and Stalin's reign of terror. This brought him under fire from the Communists, who declared him to be a propagator of the ideas of Lav Trotsky (...) With the proclamation of the Independent State of Croatia (the *NDH*) (...) he lost his post. During 1941, he was arrested four times by the Ustashi Police (...) He was imprisoned again in 1943 for a period of three months, along with his wife, under suspicion that they were planning to cross over to the Partisans (...) With the fall of the *NDH*, Mirko Kus was arrested on May 28, 1945 by the new authorities and charged with political collaboration with the occupation forces. After five months, the charge was dismissed (...) Then, on January 8, 1946 he was arrested again on the same charge (...) was sentenced to two years hard labour and five years loss of civil rights and taken away to the *Nova Gradiška Institution for Hard Labour* (...) In 1947, just before the end of his sentence, a new investigation was instituted in connection with criminal acts which had not been covered by the 1946 charge. On June 19, 1948 he was 'sentenced to a uniform penalty of eleven years of hard labour and loss of civil rights (...) for a duration of five years' (...) and continued to serve his sentence in Stara Gradiška and Sremska Mitrovica. After serving five and a half years of his sentence, he was set free on probation on April 11, 1951 after the direct intervention of Upton Sinclair, the American writer and socialist (...)" (Ivanuša 1999:227-228). We learn in an excerpt from Kus-Nikolajev's letter to Vladimir Bakarić, quoted by Dolores Ivanuša in her article, that after serving all these sentences he could not find a job, and that — among others — he sent an application for employment to the Institute for Folk Art (today the Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Research, the publisher of the *Narodna umjetnost*). Since he was

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no longer able to publish his work in Croatia, his "articles and discourses of ethnological nature were published in professional journals in Ljubljana, Paris, London, Wiesbaden, Frankfurt, Braunschweig, and Vienna" (ibid.:228).

Dolores Ivanuša also provides a "Selection from the bibliography of Dr. Mirko Kus-Nikolajev" which she informs us she compiled on the basis of the unpublished bibliography in the handwriting of Kus-Nikolajev's wife, Ženka Kus, which contains more than 850 bibliographic units (Ivanuša 1999a).

Finally, perhaps it will be interesting to mention that one of Kus-Nikolajev's professional articles ("The Nordic Origins of Early Croatian Interlace Pattern. Interlace Pattern Developed Symbolically from the Snake Ideogram", dating from 1942) served as evidence for the prosecutor against Kus-Nikolajev in the 1948 charge. "Kus Nikolajev's claim that the symbolic meaning of ornament and ornamental marks has been lost in our time, while being preserved in Early German runes, and his agreement with Strzygowski's theory about the Nordic (e.g. Celtic) origins of interlace pattern, and with the theory of the possible pre-historical links between the people of Nordic race and the Iranian Croats, were stressed as being evidence against him" (Ivanuša 1999:228).

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ZABORAVLJENI: MIRKO KUS-NIKOLAJEV Prilog za jednu ranu teoriju folklornog likovnog izraza

SAŽETAK

U članku se iz dosad zapostavljenog znanstvenog opusa dr. Mirka Kus-Nikolajeva (1896.--1961.) izdvajaju razmišljanja posvećena problematici folklornog likovnog izraza, te se ponovno čitaju u kontekstu tadašnje hrvatske etnologije i europske povijesti umjetnosti.

Posebna se pozornost obraća pitanjima: analize i interpretacije pojedinih motiva hrvatske narodne umjetnosti; određenja pojma narodne umjetnosti, odnosno koncepta "seljačke umjetnosti"; odabira i primjene etnološke metodologije.

Ključne riječi: folklorni likovni izraz, Mirko Kus-Nikolajev