

Dalibor Prančević

Museums of Ivan Meštrović
Gallery of Ivan Meštrović in Split
dalibor.prancevic@fim.hr

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Dining of Ivan Meštrović in the Town of Split

This article discusses the possibilities of presentation of the original function of the Gallery of Ivan Meštrović, once a country cottage and today a museum. The memory of the original function is preserved only in the dining room – occupied and enjoyed by one of the most prominent Croatian sculptors, Ivan Meštrović.

Ground floor of the whole west wing of the sculptor's villa was dedicated to 'conversation and dining'. Half of this wing was occupied by a representative dining room with a parlor, while the rest was reserved for the accessory rooms.

*The furniture in the dining room was manufactured by Nikola Crnokrak from the designs of Harold Bilinić in 1941. The painting *The Last Supper* (1945, Geneva), which directly visualizes the concept of dining in a religious context, has been exhibited in the dining room for several decades.*

The dining room of Ivan Meštrović with authentic furniture is a direct witness of the living standard of a period and the memory of it is all the more emphasized if we take into account the fact that the rest of the villa has been redecorated and adapted exclusively as a gallery to validate Meštrović's artistic opus.

Key words: Ivan Meštrović, Harold Bilinić, Nikola Crnokrak, dining room, Gallery of Ivan Meštrović

The only two spaces inside the permanent exhibition of the Gallery of Ivan Meštrović in the town of Split which bring memories on the life of the sculptor and his family in this place are the dining room and the parlor. The Gallery of Ivan Meštrović is a building which endured the transformation from residential to museum object because of the sculptor's dona-

tion to Croatian people.¹ The original inventory is today preserved only in the dining room and the parlor and it reveals to the observer their primary function and emphasizes memorial aspects of presentation which are completely left out from the current concept of the exhibition.² The inventory exhibited in those rooms leads us to think about food even though food is not visualized on the tables and, for now, we do not anticipate the need for such presentation.

When we talk about food in the context of art history, it is important to emphasize that this motif was not characteristic for the opus of Ivan Meštrović, even though it was not completely absent from it. Here we should mention those works which problematize the concept of 'feeding'. It was not my intention to analyze in detail all the works of similar inspiration, but only to outline the time frame when they were created. This motif appeared quite early, as early as 1903 in his work *The Last Kiss (Posljednji Cjelov)*.³ This work of art, designed as a tombstone, symbolizes death which consumes the young flesh. The similar anthropophagous topic can be found in the work *Conte Ugolino* (1905)⁴ inspired by Dante Alighieri's *Inferno*. In the sculptor's early phase we could recognize a series of works the main topic of which was feeding and that of primal nature – breastfeeding! Here we should point to the work *The First Wish (Prva želja, 1906)*,⁵ which presents a female breast with a newborn baby pressed against it.⁶ Ivan Meštrović frequently used the motif of breastfeeding in different interpretational contexts. Another important work is the *Dead Mother (Birth)/(Mrtva majka (Rođenje), 1904)*,⁷ which presents a dead mother and a newborn clutching at her breast. This work should be placed in the general context of harsh social conditions to which the undernourished mother was subjected to or the baby could be interpreted as the paradigm of the instinctive struggle for survival. The motif of breastfeeding Ivan Meštrović also applied to his own personal context while portraying his own wife breastfeeding their child,⁸ which he used several times in monumental plastic sculptures.⁹ He would

¹ The contract of donation between Ivan Meštrović and the People's Republic of Croatia was signed on January 31, 1952 and it covered one of the most important and valuable donations of an artist to Croatian people. For the purposes of transforming them into museums, Ivan Meštrović donated his villa in Split and his Zagreb home, together with sacral objects and the accompanying works of art which were situated in them: Kaštelet-Crikvine in Split and the Church of the Holy Savior near Otavice.

² The permanent exhibition was opened on May 18, 1998 (museum concept: Guido Quien, Božo Majstorović, associate: Iris Slade).

³ *Posljednji cjelov*, 1903 (Atelier Meštrović, Zagreb).

⁴ *Conte Ugolino*, 1905 (archival photography, Gallery of Ivan Meštrović, Split).

⁵ *Prva želja*, 1906 (Modern Gallery, Zagreb).

⁶ This motif was quite common in the paintings of the late 19th and early 20th century. We could find it for example in the works of the Polish painter, Stanisław Wyspiański (1869-1907), whose monograph was found in the library of the Gallery of Ivan Meštrović in Split and which once belonged to the sculptor. Special attention should be paid to the work titled *Dziecko u piersi* (pastel, 1899) and other pastels of the same topic which preceded Meštrović's work (see: Przybyszewski, S., Żuk-Skarszewski, T. (1925), *Stanisław Wyspiański*, Warszawa, Inst. Wyd. 'Biblioteka Polska').

⁷ *Mrtva majka (Rođenje)*, 1904 (archival photography, Gallery of Ivan Meštrović, Split).

⁸ Olga Meštrović breastfeeding Tvrtko, 1925 (Atelier Meštrović, Zagreb, AMZ-00188).

⁹ *Mother and Child (Majka i dijete)*, 1930 (exhibited in Zagreb and Split).

also commonly link it with the works of art connected with the religious¹⁰ context or the context of myths¹¹ and legends¹². The motif of food would be found on other examples of Meštrović's work of religious inspiration in which we could observe the tables with tableware and food. In a later phase, Meštrović repeated the motif of feeding in a series of marble reliefs from 1953, produced for *Bellevue School of Nursing* in New York on the topic of patient care.

However, this article will primarily discuss the inventory of the dining room of one of the most important Croatian sculptors of the 20th century. The Gallery was built as the sculptor's private investment and was to be used as the summer house. Inside the dining room belonging to the sculptor and his family there is still authentic inventory and the dining room is the only place in the whole building where we can observe the housing inventory important for two reasons: it is the witness of the standard of living of a period and a direct mediator of the memory of the sculptor's presence.

Here I will briefly outline the history of the usage of the building itself. Ivan Meštrović started with a planned buyoff of the building lots in, what was then, the outskirts of the town of Split on May 3, 1921 and he bought enough land to be able to imagine a place for his prolonged dwelling in Split, the town of his many memories and experiences. The link between Meštrović and Split is a complex one and it culminated with his decision to build this object.¹³ The villa was built in several stages from 1931 to 1939. When the eastern wing was built all the housing functions were organized in it and the prerequisites for a comfortable living were created. Kitchen facilities were situated in the basement of this partially built building. Ivan Meštrović first started living in such a building in 1932. The housing functions were modified in 1939 when the villa was completed and from then on the majority of the ground floor of the newly built west wing was reserved for 'conversation and dining'. One half of the low west wing of the villa was occupied by a representative dining room with a parlor – a large rectangular room with cosseted ceiling. The entrance to the dining room was through a ceremonial hall with exhibited marble sculptures. This exhibitional aspect was introduced by Meštrović himself during his stay at the villa and it can be found in the concepts of all the museum exhibitions of the later periods. The dominant material in the dining room is wood and it creates a rather different atmosphere than in other parts of the villa. This atmosphere is more appropriate for a space of intimate dwelling, no matter how luxurious it actually looks. This is important to mention because different types of stone used for building of the villa and the different grades

¹⁰ *Madonna with Jesus (Madona s Isusom)*, 1917 (Atelier Meštrović, AMZ-00248).

¹¹ *Birth of Venus (Rođenje Venere)*, 1945 (The Snite Museum of Art, Notre Dame, IN, USA).

¹² *Building of Skrad (Zidanje Skrada)*, 1906 (archival photography Gallery of Ivan Meštrović, Split).

¹³ Here is a short chronology of Meštrović's activities in Split up to the moment when he bought the first lot in Meje: he worked in Pavle Bilinić's stone-mason's workshop in 1900; inauguration of Luka Botić's Monument on Marmont's Valley in 1905; independent exhibition of Ivan Meštrović 1906; participation at the First Dalmatian Art Exhibition in Croatian House in 1908; preparation of an independent exhibition banned by the Austrian authorities in 1914; participation at the Exhibition of Yugoslav Artists from Dalmatia organized in the Big Gymnasium in 1919.

of dressing of the stone are very important for the interpretation of the object itself.¹⁴ The second half of the ground floor was occupied by auxiliary rooms (kitchen and office). A smaller elevator was installed in this room and was used for brining food from the main kitchen situated in the basement. We can assume that the majority of the cooking was done in the basement of the west wing, while this auxiliary kitchen on the ground floor was used for preparing food to be served on the table. This auxiliary room was connected with the dining room by doors. The food was carried in through these doors and was served on the table. The carefully planned luxury which Ivan Meštrović intended for his family and guests was visible in the pedals installed under the table, the purpose of which was to call discretely the table attendants.

The room in which Ivan Meštrović used to receive his guests was not without figurative sculptures. The fire place in the dining room was surrounded by caryatids with the accompanying upper structures. They presented two female figures dressed in traditional costumes which were chiseled in the local type of stone¹⁵ by Andrija Krstulović from the plaster casts of Ivan Meštrović. Since the caryatids were placed near the fire place they could be interpreted, in the tradition of Meštrović's region, as the keepers of the hearth. Here the term 'hearth' is not used randomly or just as an element of interpretation of a space. The term was used by Meštrović himself when he was making a list of his personal possessions: 'Caryatids for my hearth'.¹⁶ Women in traditional costumes became a recognizable motif Ivan Meštrović used from the early phases of his artistic work and this started in the first decade of the 20th century with the portraits of his mother.¹⁷

The architect Harold Bilinić¹⁸ was employed to do the project of the western wing and he drew a number of plans. Bilinić paid special attention to the fireplace and the casseted dining room ceiling which added a sense of grandeur to the place. This combination of the bourgeois parlor tradition and the rural tradition of Meštrović's forefathers is the most visible here. Using bricks as building material around the fireplace in a villa in which the main building material was stone suggested a different color and texture, a coziness which kept you in that part of the room. This clash of material, of brick and precious stone and the introduction of folk motifs revealed a certain recourse to Art Nouveau which Meštrović had the opportunity to absorb in Vienna, while he was studying sculpture and architecture at Vienna Academy of Fine Arts. Moreover, in the lists of the inventory for the rest of the house we could see that in the ground floor hall of the eastern wing next to the carved wooden chest, a mas-

¹⁴ It is important to mention the carefully chosen levels of relief stone dressing, from the crude drum dressing to polished stone surfaces inside the house, which contributes to the representative atmosphere but also reveals Ivan Meštrović's sculptor sensibility applied in his architectural projects.

¹⁵ Brač stone, *Veselje Fiorito*.

¹⁶ *List of My Possessions in Zagreb, Split, Josipovac, Ilica 12; first originals, May 1941.*

¹⁷ *My Mum (Moja mati)*, 1908 (GIM-00633); *My Mother (Moja majka)*, 1909 (GIM-00077).

¹⁸ Bilinić, Harold, architect (Split, 7 August 1894 – 13 October 1984). The cooperation between Harold Bilinić and Ivan Meštrović resulted in numerous projects, some of which were never materialized. See: Piplović, S. (1994), *Harold Bilinić (1894-1984)*, Split, Association of Architects, Split.

sive wooden table and an amphora, there were also four three-legged old chairs from rural regions which gave us an interesting insight into this type of interpretation of coexistence of different traditions.¹⁹ A kind of 'musical salon' occupied the large central hall on the first floor which had an exit to a terrace and was furnished by a long wooden table with ten leather upholstered chairs and a Bösendorfer piano.²⁰

There were many speculations about the designer of the furniture found in the dining room of Ivan Meštrović's villa in Split. It was frequently suggested that it was made from the sketches of the sculptor himself, but we could consider that to be only partially true. When discussing Meštrović's influence on his associates who worked with him on his many architectural projects, we should mention the opinion of the architect Neven Šegvić who described Meštrović's contribution in the following way:

*'Well, Bilinić and Horvat, architects with their own architectural personalities solved in Meštrović's studio those segments of the architectural work which the sculptor Meštrović clearly could not solve himself. However, his presence was constant. Meštrović corrected things, his architectural instinct shaped everything.'*²¹

And in this sense we could talk about the contribution of Ivan Meštrović in the process of interior decoration of the Split villa. After all, we should not forget that he was the ordering client. However, the furniture sketches were drawn by Harold Bilinić, which became evident from the purchase order Ivan Meštrović signed in Zagreb on February 28, 1941, for Nikola Crnokrak, the owner of the *Furniture, woodcarving and drawing studio* at the address Kunišćak 22, Zagreb. The purchase order was for all the dining room furniture.²² The contract specified that the furniture had to be of the first class and made of the best quality Slavonian oak, elaborately carved in the style of English Renaissance, brown soaked in lye, polished and antique-appearing. Upholstering had to be done in the best possible way using the first quality materials and everything had to be covered in pigskin. All the items listed in the contract had to be done exactly from the sketches and instructions of Harold Bilinić. An interesting detail was that the part of the contract specially emphasizing Harold Bilinić's name was added later, by the handwriting different from Nikola Crnokrak's by which the rest of the document had been written. That other handwriting was strikingly similar to

¹⁹ *Inventory of the movable property in the house/gallery/Meštrović in Split* (Archive of the Gallery Ivan Meštrović in Split).

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Šegvić, N. (1983/84), Ivan Meštrović i arhitektura, in: *Arhitektura*, 186-187-188, pg. 4-9.

²² Archives of the Gallery Ivan Meštrović in Split. The furniture was listed in the following way: one sideboard with six doors (250x105x60cm), in the central part three drawers, lower part open with one shelf without riquande; two Anrichte with 3 mm doors, lower part open as with the sideboard; one table with extension (280x100x78, length when extended 420 cm); one server with two drawers (150x60x78); four armchairs upholstered with pigskin; twelve chairs upholstered with pigskin; one bench (550x60x35-80), lower part full, the seat can be opened, five matching cushions; one two-legged table (250x75x70), the table top 4 cm thick; five armchairs upholstered with pigskin; one round table (Ø100, 60 cm tall); three armchairs upholstered with pigskin with three matching seat pillows stuffed with fluffs and covered with red plush.

the handwriting of Ivan Meštrović. The copy of the invoice that Nikola Crnokrak issued on October 14, 1941, to Ivan Meštrović²³ as well as the design sketches of the furniture, now kept in the Atelier Meštrović in Zagreb,²⁴ confirmed that the furniture was made under the provisions of that contract. Numeration on the sketches did not match the numeration on the order form, but the dimensions of each piece of furniture matched and their outlook clearly confirmed their connection.²⁵

The order form precisely stated that the sideboard, table, chairs and armchairs had to be delivered before the end of June and the rest of the furniture by the end of July 1941. These dates are important because they help us establish the history of the usage of certain materials by the client, in this case, Ivan Meštrović.

But let us briefly return to Nikola Crnokrak and his studio. According to the data found in the documentation of Atelier Meštrović and which was obtained from Crnokrak's heirs, Nikola opened his atelier in 1915 and was joined by his son Dragutin in 1925, after he finished his study of architecture for interior design and his specialization abroad (Germany, Austria).²⁶ According to the same source, atelier was closed in 1972. A newspaper article from the early 1930ies mentioned that Nikola Crnokrak participated at the International Exhibition in Brussels where the Belgian king awarded him, and an art founder Zvonimir Oblak, a diploma and a golden medal of the first order and proclaimed him the 'grand master craftsman'.²⁷

We could conclude that the cooperation and mutual trust between Nikola Crnokrak and Ivan Meštrović continually lasted from the 1820ies when Meštrović ordered from

²³ Archive of the Gallery Ivan Meštrović in Split.

²⁴ Archive of the Atelier Meštrović in Zagreb.

²⁵ May 1940 found on one of the sketches was probably the time when Ivan Meštrović finally accepted the proposal on the furniture design and signed the order form on the following year.

²⁶ *Nikola Crnokrak - Woodcarving Studio and Carpentry in Zagreb*, 1928; no other data on publication were found (source Archive of the Atelier Meštrović, Zagreb).

'(...) Mr. Nikola Crnokrak learned his trade in the woodcarving trade school in Stara Gradiška in 1891. He was a living example how a son of common peasants could become an excellent expert. He was self educated and he became skilled enough to make his own sketches for his works. Later he went to Vienna, where he turned his skill and knowledge into art. In 1915 he opened his own atelier which employed 15 associates. I was really amazed to see what was made in that atelier. You couldn't tell if you were more impressed by those special artistic works for dining or sleeping or offices, working salons, halls, etc. manufactured in all the possible styles: Renaissance, Baroque, Rococo, different Louis's, Empire, Biedermeier, and very tasty rooms and furniture of modern style. The rooms of the studio themselves, six of them, all appeared very comfortable, because ever hygienic rule was followed in their design, they were airy and bright and contributed to the creative atmosphere. Besides the working rooms, there was also a special atelier for woodcarving and wood inlaying and a special sculpting atelier. Good support and help Mr. Nikola Crnokrak had in his son Dragutin, who had finished the woodcarving trade with his father and continued his education in major European centers and passed the exam for interior decoration architect at the Art Trade School in Detmold, Germany (...).'

²⁷ *Golden Medal for Two Zagreb Tradesmen (1930?/1931?)*, in: *Obrtnički vjesnik*, 49, pg. 3 (Source: Archive of Atelier Meštrović, Zagreb).

Crnokrak furniture for his Zagreb house.²⁸ The cooperation continued when the villa in Split had to be furnished. Confirmation of their bond could be found in the letter from 1942 in which Meštrović asks Crnokrak to borrow him some chisels, since he had forgotten his in Split.²⁹ At that time Meštrović was under house arrest in Mletačka Street Nr. 8, after months of incarceration.

According to the data from the archive of the Gallery Ivan Meštrović in Split, the furniture did not arrive to Split by the time specified in the contract. It was delivered by the end of that year when Meštrović was in Zagreb and when he was being arrested and taken to prison in Savska Street. The *Export Permit* from October 15, 1941, testifies on the journey of the furniture and specifies that around 39 pieces of furniture were exported from the Independent State of Croatia, from Zagreb, to Italy, to the address of Professor Ivan Meštrović in the occupied Split. The shipment was loaded on October 25, 1941. Export regulations necessitated the *Certificate of Origin by Chamber of Trades and Crafts* in Zagreb (with the date October 25, 1941), which stated that the exported furniture was used furniture. Furthermore, the General Consul of Italy issued the permit of shipment to Split on November 1, 1941. Ivan Meštrović left Split in September 1941 and went to his Zagreb home. At the beginning of November 1941, in the absence of the owner, the furniture was received by Marin Marasović, a man whom Ivan Meštrović entrusted with some building works on his villa.³⁰ Hence, Ivan Meštrović could not see the furniture which was placed to the proper positions just before 1959 when the sculptor last visited Croatia.³¹ After his traumatic prison experience from the end of 1941 and the beginning of 1942, the sculptor left his country and went to the United States of America and got the American citizenship quite quickly, in 1954.

This fact does not make this ambiance any less authentic. The place testifies on Ivan Meštrović's careful study of the room assigned for dining which, unfortunately, he was not able to finish himself. But it was used by his family for a short period before they left the country and by the tenants who lived there during the Second World War.

In the later periods, this room was supplemented by the presentation of dining in a religious context, which was a part of exhibition and museum conceptions. A large composition *The Last Supper*, which Meštrović painted in 1945 in Geneva, during his

²⁸ Plazibat, D (2004), *Od doma do muzeja (Ivan Meštrović u Zagrebu)*, Zagreb, Foundation of Ivan Meštrović. The author discusses the transformation of the private adaptation of a historical city house to the house of Ivan Meštrović and then to a public museum (Atelier Meštrović) and emphasizes the fact that the original furniture, mostly designed by Ivan Meštrović, as made in the woodcarving studio Crnokrak in Zagreb. Relieves presenting the two working artists on the backs of chairs and a chandelier were made by Petar Loboda, Meštrović's student, from Meštrović's drawings.

²⁹ The letter Ivan Meštrović wrote to Nikola Crnokrak, Zagreb, February 20, 1942 (Archive Atelier Meštrović, Zagreb).

³⁰ See: Prančević, D (2006), *Prilog povijesti gradnje Vile Meštrović u Splitu*, u: *Kultura ladanja*, zbornik Dana Cvita Fiskvića, pg. 315-330, Zagreb, Institut za povijest umjetnosti, Odsjek za povijest umjetnosti Filozofskog fakulteta Sveučilišta u Zagrebu.

³¹ After he left his country in 1942, Ivan Meštrović visited it only once, in 1959, in order to see the museums exhibiting his works.

Swiss emigration (1943-1946), was exhibited in the dining room. Through its theme, this painting underlines the primary function of this room, and reminds us on refectories.³² The tableware and the food found on the table of the *Last Supper* contribute to the symbolic interpretation of the whole scene.

Anyway, Ivan Meštrović's dining room with the specially designed furniture testifies on the table etiquette of a time, and the memory of the living standard of that time is even more prominent if we take into account that the rest of the villa is now redecorated and adapted entirely to the valorization of his artistic opus.

Translated by Tanja Bukovčan

³² In the letter Olga Meštrović sent to Duško Kečkemet on January 8, 1980, she stated that the *Last Supper* was intended for the dining room (Archive of the Gallery Ivan Meštrović, Split).