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## Croatian Art and National Identity from the End of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century until the Second World War

The relation between visual art and national identity played an important role in the shaping of modern society in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. In Central Europe art was a key asset for expressing national feelings. The artists were regarded as indispensable shapers of national identity; their task was to build up stable national cultures like the ones that already existed in the western part of the Continent. The desire to painterly contribute to national identity was in the case of Croatia a reaction to a permanent possibility of losing cultural and artistic particularity at the time when the movements in domestic art began to depend on dominant international articulations of modernity in visual art. This paper identifies and briefly analyses the crucial phases of the relation between Croatian art and national identity in the period from the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the Second World War.

The first phase was marked by historical painting linked with political demands for painterly interpretation of events from Croatian history during the period following the Croatian-Hungarian Agreement, as well as by idealized depictions of country life and local landscape. The second phase was formed by Izidor Kršnjavi; it resulted from the renovation project of the Department for Religious Affairs and Education in Opatička 10, Zagreb. The principal task of decorating the Department's palace was the formation of cultural and national identity through a complex structure of artworks. Each of them had a strictly defined role in the conveyance of mostly non-artistic messages. The third phase is linked with the exhibition of the Croatian Salon, held in Zagreb Art Pavilion in 1898. This exhibition articulated the ideas about the necessity of including national art into the European context, so in accordance with this there was a lively discussion going on about the necessity of identifying national character-

istics of Croatian art. The fourth phase was determined by the Yugoslav idea and the activity of two artist associations, Lada and Medulić Society. The activity of Croatian artists in the context of Yugoslav ideology was the consequence of the advancing process of disintegration of the multinational state community, of which Croatia was a part at that time. The fifth and the final phase is characterized by the activity of the Group of Three Artists and the Zemlja Association of Artists at the end of the third and the beginning of the fourth decade, when the idea of national artistic expression reached its peak not only in terms of theory, but also in terms of actual art production. Ljubo Babić, the leader of the Group of Three Artists, by his attitude influenced the general atmosphere in which the striving for a national expression in visual art became an unavoidable goal – his idea of “local expression” was based on the recognition of elements emerging from national artistic heritage, folklore, and properties of the region in which particular art was created, which meant linking art with its environment. Unlike Babić, Krsto Hegedušić associated the striving to establish an independent, national expression in painting with ideological guidelines of the Zemlja Association of Artists. This tendency was determined by a complex body of properties. They are mostly negative attitudes towards contemporary European art and avant-garde tendencies, a focus on the rural complex, the stress on primitive art principles, and the connection between ideological and national categories.

**Key words:** Croatian modern art, national identity, national expression  
in visual arts