

A virtuosity that spent decades in silence – that is what we could call the art and destiny of Omer Mujadžić (Bosanska Gradiška, 1903 – Zagreb, 1991). The artist that received loud accolades when he returned from Paris with his refined neo-realism, did not have a single solo exhibition in the city he lived and worked in for more than seventy years, since 1933 until his death.¹ There is more than one reason for such fortune, including undoubtedly the artist's persistence in the belief that "One should respect tradition and build a future on it," in a figuration-unfriendly environment.² Mujadžić was neglected partly due to Grgo Gamulin's evaluation which reduced his dialogue with European artistic heritage to "academic intimism" and described his insisting on familiar subjects as creative inertness and indifference towards the Zeitgeist.³ The complexity of his rich body of work came to light thanks to Aida Abadžić Hodžić, who curated a retrospective at the Art Pavilion some ten years ago, rejecting Omer Mujadžić's academism in its pejorative sense. Rather, she raised the question of "the willing and very modern challenging and feeling tradition."⁴

Mujadžić himself most probably repelled *fortuna critica* and exposed himself to the "noise of the stifling environment and flurry" only on his way from home to the back entrance of the Academy of Fine Art in Zagreb, where he taught for forty-two years. "Total isolation gets my vote," was his instruction for the preservation of artistic integrity. However, continuous resistance towards exhibiting any even slightly older piece had an impact on the work's isolation from the public. Never entirely satisfied with his achievement, he held a solo exhibition only twice, at two minor shows – as a twenty-year-old in Zagreb's Ulrich Salon and in 1978 at Salon 13 in Tuzla (Bosnia and Herzegovina).⁵

Other chapters of his life remained equally mysterious, including an interesting story from the history of Croatian private collections, whose protagonists are three generations of the Hanžeković family.

¹ A. Abadžić Hodžić: *Omer Mujadžić*, Art Pavilion Zagreb, 2001, p. 12.

² G. Quien: *Slikar nijansa i uspomena*, Studio, 1983.

³ G. Gamulin: *Hrvatsko slikarstvo XX. stoljeća*, vol. I, Naprijed, Zagreb, 1987, p. 385.

⁴ A. Abadžić Hodžić, *ibid*, p. 14.

⁵ Contrary to popular belief, according to the testimony of the artist's daughter Emina Kranjčec, Ljubo Babić was also partly blame for her father's marginalisation. Even though he initially supported his student, he later, as the proof-reader of the Encyclopaedia of Art, dedicated too little space to his work. After many, many years, he apologised to him for that, with a great amount of remorse.

In the 1930s Mujadžić joined a secret society which included his friend Maksimilijan Vanka and former professors Tomislav Krizman, Branko Šenoa and Joza Kljaković.⁶ It was in this intellectual circle that Mujadžić first met Marijan Hanžeković, a retired county prefect.⁷

After the war, the artist fostered a friendship with the son of his long-time acquaintance, Marijan Hanžeković and his wife Nada, née Tomljenović. In 1952 and 1953, the young couple, doctor and counsellor to Croatian National Bank's governor, bought three of the artist's works which traditionally reflected the genre of "the concealed and the personal, used to defend and represent civic freedom": two portraits and a nude.⁸ Thirteen years later their children, Marijana, the older daughter, and fourteen-year-old son Marijan would also pose for Mujadžić.⁹

Growing up in an environment enriched with artistic heritage that his parents managed to preserve, Marijan Hanžeković Jr. developed a penchant for visual art, especially Croatian Modernism. After becoming a lawyer, he had enough means to begin gradually compiling his own collection, which has until this day gained substantial excellence, size and timeframe.

Five of Mujadžić's works it contains comprise a separate unit which confirms the long neglected notion of the stylistic heterogeneity of his work.

Omer Mujadžić was born 1903 in Bosanska Gradiška, in a large family of the landowner and merchant Mehmed and his wife Zuhra née Čaušević. After elementary school in his hometown, he went to high school in Derventa, Banja Luka and Sarajevo. After graduating from high school, he moved to Zagreb to take up painting at the Royal College of Arts and Crafts. At that moment he was only fifteen, and enrolment required his father's written approval. In the final years of this twelve-semester study, Mujadžić supported himself by working as a preparator at the Royal University Botanical Institute. "I would spend nights just staring through the

⁶ I. Mužić: *Masonstvo u Hrvata*, Naklada Bošković, Split, 2005, pp. 388, 394, 426, 443.

⁷ County prefect Marijan Hanžeković was a patron of Vladimir Becić, Tomislav Krizman, Kornelije Tomljenović i Maksimilijan Vanka.

⁸ I. Zidić: *Hrvatsko moderno slikarstvo 1880-1945 u privatnim zbirkama*, Deči Gallery, Zagreb, 2006, p. 51.

⁹ The Hanžeković couple belonged to the non-ostentatious bourgeois middle class, the most frequent consumer of Mujadžić's art. The greatness of Mujadžić was also evident from his generous commercial positions – almost all paintings were equally and pretty moderately priced. "A painting should never cost more than an average salary," he used to repeat, trying to protect his art from being reduced to mere material value.

microscope and making filaments, stems and cells on a metre-wide piece of paper!" he remembered the period when necessity forced him to practice patience and drawing skills. After graduating from the Academy, mentored by Ljubo Babić, he went to Paris on a French government bursary. At the entrance examination at Académie des arts décoratifs he proved as one of the best candidates, so he was recommended to switch to the more demanding L'École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux Arts. At the time of the full affirmation of avant-garde movements, this famous institution still fostered a conservative teaching approach, promoted by professors such as Eugène Narbonne. Insufficiently motivated by such courses, Mujadžić found his inspiration at the Louvre, before paintings by El Greco, Velazquez, Ingres, Corot... Another outlet was a studio near Vincennes Park that he shared with Vinko Grdan and Kamilo Tompa. After the freshman year, Mujadžić was given the honour to participate at Salon d'automne exhibition. The same autumn he left school and took up art history at Sorbonne University. In the 1920s Paris was the meeting place of "new realisms", movements born in response to the ending of the chaotic wartime period. Picasso and Derrin's neo-classicism, André Lhote's cubo-constructivism, and other phenomena which mirrored a desire to return to classic aestheticism were close to Mujadžić, educated in Zagreb and raised in the close proximity of Kljaković's epic and monumental characters.

After two years, Mujadžić returned to Zagreb and continued to develop this "strange synthesis of Zagreb and Paris"¹⁰, that Aida Abadžić Hodžić rightfully identified as the "purity of expression with an imprint of 'estrangement', a captured moment, characteristic of magic realism."¹¹ Twenty-three-year-old Mujadžić proved as a sensitive portrait painter. Abadžić Hodžić wrote the following about his spiritual expressions: "It is precisely the impenetrability and mystery of one's internal being that elevates the meaning of portraits and self-portraits in the period of magic realism, while the focus on the character is highlighted by utter reduction in terms of the description of their living spaces." One might say that Mujadžić's inclination to the magical gained momentum (in a completely different artistic manner) half a century later, in the scenes of mysterious female chambers, devoid of details and chromatic abundance. After the exhibition of graphic works of the Group of Six at Ulrich Salon

¹⁰ G. Gamulin, *ibid*, p. 380.

¹¹ A. Abadžić Hodžić, *ibid*, p. 21.

following his return in 1926, alongside Augustinčić, Grdan, Pečnik, Postružnik and Tabaković, critics pointed him out as the best participant. Next year, the Spring Salon exhibition presented as many as thirty Mujadžić's works.

A work almost completely unknown until this day, a river landscape¹² and fishermen dressed in middle-Bosnian traditional costumes, is a paradigm of Zvonko Maković's opinion how "after returning to Zagreb, Mujadžić was one of those artists who would, in every sense, shape one of the most brilliant segments of Croatian painting: a local variety of 'new objectivity'".¹³ The building blocks of this magnificent composition were: dramatic shortening of the perspective, "mildly ironic expression of hypertrophied 'thick' figures, magical obsession that elevates people and scenes into another, more ideal world" and suppressed, earthy, dark green and blue tones, as well as local colours with metallic reflections and toughened by lead clearly mirror the spirit of magic realism.¹⁴ It is hard to believe that this painting was created in 1928, the same year as his famous work *In a cafe*, in which Mujadžić utterly renounced the outlines and constructivist discipline to the benefit of free strokes and visible traces of paint. The painting *Fishing* displays subtle gradation in tone and easy brush strokes married with clear black drawing lines which dimension the movement of the characters, hence marking the passage to a new chapter of Mujadžić's work.

Influenced by his Parisian companions Augustinčić, Grdan and Tompa, in 1929 Mujadžić joined the establishment of the Earth Group. Even though Batušić pointed him out at the opening of the Earthlings' exhibition at Ulrich Salon as the "most powerful and prominent personality of the entire exhibition", Mujadžić left the group only a year later.¹⁵ The cause of his break-up with the Earthlings was surely not ideological, as testified by his socially involved works made in the early 1930s, such as *Worker* or *Factory Landscape*. It is more probable that Mujadžić's lonesome and independent nature and art-for-art's-sake spirit was not comfortable with submission to the principles of the group and a loud programme.

¹² Mujadžić might have depicted the estuary of Fojnica River into Bosna River.

¹³ A statement given at the opening of Omer Mujadžić's exhibition in 1996, at the Bosnian and Herzegovinian Cultural Centre in Zagreb.

¹⁴ I. Reberski: *Realizmi dvadesetih godina u hrvatskom slikarstvu*, Institute of Art History, Zagreb, 1997, pp. 43, 44 and 242.

¹⁵ S. Batušić: *Izložba udruženja umjetnika „Zemlja“*, Hrvatska revija, no. 12, Zagreb, 1929, pp 720-22.

At the same time, right along the scenes of working class poverty and the suburbia, Mujadžić's work began featuring rural motifs, announcing a great chapter of Bosnian pastoral, which would occupy this artist's thoughts for an entire decade. Having reached a point of personal and artistic maturity, Mujadžić returned to his homeland – the idyllic ambiance of Bosanska Krajina. The main protagonists of this important subject matter are women from Mujadžić's childhood: full-figured Muslim women, dressed in pastel-toned jodhpurs, with hair covered in embroidered veils. The painting kept in the Hanžeković collection is the first (and finest) part of the cycle created between 1938 and 1940, featuring the motif of women "going for water." *Girls on the Fountain* are an Arcadian scene drenched in fresh green and a classical, deepened composition with three graces in the foreground (and one distant female character as staffage), whose mutual relationship describes the gradation of everyday female activities: coming to the fountain, waiting for their turn, pouring water and leaving. Their traits reflect Mujadžić's ideal of beauty: a large woman, light-skinned, with a high forehead and almond eyes, just like his *Portrait of a Sister*, seen by Mujadžić even in the antique sculptures kept at the Louvre. The rich land cover, pleated drapes, the sanguine incarnate of young bodies, the brilliance of the pitchers' enamel and the water gush foam are indicated with a network of swift, albeit disciplined strokes. Given the nature of the activity, it is probably dawn, but the semi-obscure mother-of-pearl brilliance makes no indication of the time of day, achieving a magical ambience.

The painting of afternoon heat and light, with a scene of working in the field, is one of the "more direct masteries that more often wind up in private collections than on museum walls."¹⁶ *Reapers* kept in the Hanžeković Collection were made in a single blast, like a study, represent Mujadžić's virtuoso attempt at describing the dynamics of harvest, exploding grains and swaying corn, but in larger, more detailed compositions. Very few Croatian modernist works like this one, finished in tiny, gently applied spots, present a worthier homage to Corot's late landscapes.

The treetop motif, passionately elaborated by Mujadžić during the 1930s, built even in the design of the back side of the Yugoslavian coin designed in 1935, perhaps originates from the iconography of the movement he belonged to. Alongside

¹⁶ I. Zidić, *ibid*, p 50.

hourglass, hair is the secret symbol of Freemasons, reminding of the inevitability of death. Water pitcher, present in the motif of women on the fountain, and a piece of bread, frequently repeated by Mujadžić, are symbols of simplicity. Mujadžić found them quite surely in the contemplation chamber, where he was placed during the Freemason rite of passage.

In the late 1930s, Mujadžić's art starts featuring different varieties of *Lying Nude*: a dormant woman with a stretched full-figured body. This motif would appear throughout the next four decades in the works of pure intimism.¹⁷ From the early 1940s, the artist dissected the outline of her body and used the narrowed chromatic register, the same he used for *Lying Nude* in 1945. Next to dominant grey and blue tones, a ruby red pigment appeared, which gave the incarnate certain freshness. Such a choice could have been the first step towards creating the "Mujadžić grey."

Mujadžić was fascinated with femininity and its various manifestations: motherhood, love, sorority... His nudes have sometimes been carelessly compared with Venus of Urbino or Rokeby, which share a similar composition. Quite the contrary, Mujadžić's women dream, but not as Giorgione's goddess who invites to be awoken. They turned their faces away from us – they are self-sufficient. They are naked, but still "pure and dignified," distant in their loneliness. The observer is only an intruder in their chambers. Formed in the environment where a woman is concealed from the male view, Mujadžić was aware of the eroticism of the unattainable.

A still life with fruit is built in *Lying Nude*, while in the upper left-hand corner there is a part of the plaster sculpture of Venus de Milo, appearing in *Interior with Sculpture*, made in 1937/38. Mujadžić must have considered *Lying Nude* from the Hanžeković Collection a very successful work, since after its completion he immediately set out to make a copy with insignificant changes, such as flowers instead of the fruit bowl.

The same character appeared in 1952 in pastel and watercolour, materials Mujadžić seldom used. His rare later works in pastel are characterised by impasto, quite differently from the impressionist ethereal and light *Lying Nude*. Mujadžić masterfully highlighted all the key elements of the scene, barely even touching the paper.

¹⁷ Explaining the phenomenon of intimist painting in her essay *Intimizam u hrvatskom slikarstvu* (*Intimism in Croatian Painting*, Modern Gallery, Zagreb, 2009), Ivana Reberski seems to describe Mujadžić and particular chapters of his work.

However, this is the only work of great abstract traits. Mujadžić, who used to say later in his life that he never did anything abstract because he would not be able to paint anything more wondrous than a Persian rug, was influenced by a particular technique that made him surround his model with a series of direct, often unmotivated strokes. One should bear in mind that only a year before that Michel Tapié set up the programmatic exhibition *The Meaning of l'Art Informel*.

Ljubo Babić praised Mujadžić's portraits very early on, underlining the psychological shrewdness of the young artist. Hanžeković family portraits testify of Mujadžić's unorthodox approach to the subject – his models' character is conveyed not only in their look and facial expression, but also the choice of colours and facture. He tried also to imply a stylistic context his model would fit in.

Mujadžić got to know the family as a patient of Nada Hanežeković, a docent at the Clinic for Maxillofacial Surgery and Clinical Dentistry. "They say that he used to paint my Mum for more than two months, while he would finish my Dad in one afternoon. He had problems with me; I went over to pose at least a dozen times," recalls Marijan Hanžeković.

Nada Hanžeković was portrayed in her early mature age, in an "autumnal" atmosphere of warm brownish tones which highlighted her seriousness and stability. Mujadžić chose a neo-classicist approach in order to accentuate bourgeois unconventionality and representativeness of the former Governor's daughter. A special treatment of light and foregrounding the volume of her hands in the close-up creates a magical atmosphere.

The manner of execution, a single blow of vehement strokes and illustrative sketchiness, expressed Marijan Hanžeković's personality. This prominent intellectual, German professor, a PhD in law and a macro-economist, was a man of volcanic character, direct, curt, dynamic and most probably lacking in sufficient patience for long posing sessions.

Mujadžić placed his son Marijan in a mysterious intimist context. The boy is reaching manhood; it is still uncertain how he would turn out to be. Still, the master anticipated decisiveness and resilience so he gave him a steady gaze and permeated his facial expression with the acuity of archaic plasticity.

One of the most impressive elements of the painting is the grey surface of the young man's sweater. Mujadžić achieved the impression of the material's density by tightly layering several colours. The artist began testing the possibilities of the grey tone in the 1940s and one of the most important components he joined with the grey palette was the red rubia tinctorium pigment. The issues of grey, considered by Paul Klee to be the most luscious "colour" giving voice to all others, occupied Mujadžić to the end of his life. For that reason, critics described him as boring.

Two biographies of the masters of the greyscale close to Mujadžić show irrationality and superficiality of the environment surrounding them. Whistler, who dedicated his art in its entirety to the "exercise" of tones, was publicly put to shame when he exposed his finest analysis of the relations between grey and black, *The Artist's Mother*. Fifteen years later, Danish symbolist Vilhelm Hammershoi created a portrait of his own mother, undoubtedly inspired by Whistler, and received great praise. The interiors of this northern artist, emptied rooms with a lonely female character, are very similar to Mujadžić's for their contemplation. His own first recognition also took place early, with the portrait of his sister. A similar sensibility and inclinations are evident in both Whistler and Mujadžić as well as in their statements of synaesthesia. Mujadžić compared hues with musical tones and Whistler called many of his works in musical terms.

And truly, the small painting *Hearth* could be described as a musical piece of simple harmonic rhythm expressing one tonality throughout but using changing timbre and intensity to explore the natural cadence points that exist within a single mode.

Mujadžić achieved such diversity with different intensity of magenta red, which makes a violet tone when combined with black and white. The principle of achieving a maximum of success with a minimum of means is evident also in his reduction of the inventory to just a few objects. Such reduction, accompanied by summary modulation, made a small-scale painting appear monumental. Every painting is a variety of a larger eponymous composition.

Analysing the lightened and shadowed particles of the paintings, one must call to mind the Dutch masters of interior genre, Gerard ter Borch, Pieter de Hoogh,

Vermeer, whose spiritualised atmosphere is a result of light treatment. In Mujadžić's works, just like theirs, matriarchy peacefully resides. The male and the female character fit into the sexual archetype: supple and gentle woman, aggressive and powerful man (*Boxers, Football*). The only exception is the boy's character, the favourite inhabitant of neat female chambers, who lingers around his mistresses' feet. It is a reflection of memories – Mujadžić's self-portrait.

A collection always shows the nature of the collector. And the collector's inclination towards a certain body of work often reveals similarities with the author. One might say that loyalty to one's own taste, and thus one's own personality, is equally important to the collector Marijan Hanžeković as it was to his favourite artist. If you ask him why he bought a certain artwork, before he starts talking about it at length, he will tell you: "Because I found it beautiful." The same principle is evident in Omer Mujadžić's words: "I think my paintings originate from my childhood. I can feel the smell and light of these days long gone, memories that have not faded at all. A man should feel where he belongs, what is his nature, what suits him. Only this way he will create his best."