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The Paradigm of Decline-Metamorphosis-Rebirth in Fine Arts

The triad of decline-metamorphosis-rebirth constantly reappears in the history of civilisation, it is current in all historical periods and cultural environments, in different areas and the most diverse contexts. Its manifestations are countless and the same is true of its interpretations. They are especially frequent in the area of art, because the evolutionary model, grounded in the idea of cyclic development comes very handy for explanations and illustrations which seek to present complicated things in a simple and clear way. The history of art, mainly in the 19th century, advocated a tripartite development of art which seeks greater perfection and maturity and reaches its peak just to be then inevitably followed by a decline in artistic originality and power. Already for some time now the evolutionary model has been shown too ineffective in addressing scholarly questions, especially due to oversimplification and a priori classification of subject matter which cannot possibly be classified. The perception that the art of the Early Renaissance was a preliminary period for more mature and accomplished achievements of High Renaissance which at some point began to lose its drive and went into decline either by repeating outmoded forms or their decomposition, is not only naive, but simply wrong and represents a misunderstanding of the essence of art. In much the same way it would be equally wrong to label in advance the early works of a certain artist as not-mature-yet or possessing less artistic authenticity.

An artist may go through ups and downs in his creation, his development is therefore much more complex. Moreover, one cannot ignore the fact that some masters have gone down in the annals of history as writers of a single novel or as authors of a handful of paintings, which surpassed everything else they produced in many years or decades of their artistic careers. Others – and to be sure, they are rare – sealed their genius already with their first work and thus their genius is seen to possess the same expressive power in their late creations. One could go on forever enumerating the examples which prove that the evolutionary model of development and decline in art does not sustain critical judgement.

However, one comes across the triad decline-metamorphosis-rebirth time and again, not only in the writings on art, but also more widely, in works from the area of culture and civilisation. To be honest, nowadays in some branches of the humanities it is still as frequent as it was in the past. The reason for this is quite simple: the



triadic pattern is familiar on all levels, and above all possesses an archetypal value and is firmly rooted in symbolic thinking and our understanding of the world. If it is understood correctly, i.e. as a tool of symbolic logic, it may be useful also in research on art. However, it is essential to be aware that there are no fixed points of transformation in the triad of decline-metamorphosis-rebirth – all three phases are interwoven, so it would be wrong to look out for discrete turning points as there are no breaks in the continuum. The end is therefore the beginning, the dying of the old creates the circumstances for the birth of something new. The process, which is symbolically covered in the paradigm of decline-metamorphosis-rebirth, is a continuous and constant motion. It might be compared to the motion of the waves: where exactly does the wave break and where does its upwards impetus begin? Does it really matter that much? Another trap which needs to be avoided if we plan to use the above mentioned paradigm in the area of art appropriately is expressing value judgements. None of the three levels is a priori better or more important than the other, each one of them is a constituent part of the process with its own characteristics and features. They need to be identified, analysed and evaluated, but by no means should they be examined through the prism of the outmoded idea on evolution in art. The paradigm of decline-metamorphosis-rebirth is treated in this spirit in different areas of research by five Slovenian art historians of younger generation in the thematic section of this edition of *Ars & Humanitas*.

Miha Zor, a researcher involved in late Medieval art, predominantly in illuminated manuscripts of the Arthurian cycle, analyses in his contribution titled *Narrative metamorphosis through images: The Case of Opening Miniatures in the Estoire del saint Graal in BnF, fr. 105 and fr. 9123* two French manuscripts recounting the story of the Holy Grail. The two illustrated codex with the story of grail (*Estoire del saint Graal*) are now preserved in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France (MS fr. 105 and MS fr. 9123). With refined erudition, the author deals with the graphic metamorphosis of a literary text as witnessed in the miniatures on the cover of the discussed manuscripts. The scenes from the romance, depicted in the cover miniatures and composed of several sections are first analysed formally and iconographically and then followed by a presentation of the way these images, assembled in a cover miniature form a round-up visual narrative. In doing so, the author explains how the images on the cover miniature are associated with other miniatures in the manuscript and how interpretative characterisation formed by the cover is confirmed in the choice of depicted episodes and their visual interpretation of a literary text.

Gašper Cerkovnik dedicates his study to an interesting case of the way the Munich art circle influenced some of the monuments which were created in the Slovenian

space in the first third of the 17th century. Following the case of the painting *The last judgement* by Christophe Schwarz which was made for Renata of Lorraine, the wife of William V., the Duke of Bavaria, or rather the graphic made by Jan Sadeler I after the painting, shows the direct influence of the famous mural in the so-called Lutheran Cellar in Sevnica and of the mural in the church of the castle above Stari trg near Slovenj Gradec. In both cases Sadeler's print served as a direct source material for the painting *The Last Judgement*. The author stresses that some details from the graphic source were also taken when painting the parochial church in Ormož, dating from around 1630, and the canvas painting in the pilgrimage church of St Mary in Puščava on Pohorje. The author pays special attention to the culturally historical framework and iconographic particularity which developed in the context of the Slovenian Counter-Reformation and successfully demonstrates how in spite of the differences among the various works of art, they all preserve and also partly enhance the Counter-Reformation outlines of Schwarz's *Last judgement*.

Ines Unetič, an expert on garden art in Carniola in the 18th and 19th century, deals in her article titled *Botanical Gardens and Collecting of Plants in the Light of the Metamorphosis of Botanical Collections in Carniola at the Beginning of the 19th Century* with an aspect of garden art which is rarely discussed by art historians: the question of plants adorning the gardens of the noblemen in Carniola and with the fascination of some noblemen and intellectuals with botany, the collecting and growing of flowers, shrubs and ornamental trees. Using archive sources and the surviving correspondence of some of the most prominent protagonists, such as Jožef Erberg, brothers Žiga and Karl Zois, the Jesuit vicar Gabriel Gruber and cathedral canon Frančišek Ksaver Anton de Webern, the author uncovers previously unknown aspects of the development of garden art, mainly concerning the growing of native and non-native ornamental plants in 18th century Carniola. The phenomenon of collecting plants is compared to the passion of collecting for natural history cabinets which kept the most precious curiosities of diverse kinds. The author stresses that the decline of natural history cabinets and private botanical gardens in the early 19th century with the gradually increasing prominence of public parks which triumphantly compete with the gardens of the noblemen may be seen as the metamorphosis of the same process which gained new manifestation forms in changed social circumstances.

Asta Vrečko, who devotes her research to new Slovenian art discusses in her article *Establishing the National Expression in the Work of the Independent Group of Slovenian Artist (The Independent)* the demanding theme of the national expression in the works of artists from the Association of Independent Slovenian Artists. The author outlines the key features of cultural and artistic climate in Yugoslavia in the

period between the two world wars and the significance of the Academy of Fine Arts in Zagreb, especially of the two painters, Krsto Hegedušić and Ljubo Babić who gave lectures there and even as professors made an impression on the Slovenian students who later formed the Association of the Independents. The Independents strove in their art to find and form their own, authentic Slovenian expression in the fine arts. They drew on the historical heritage of the Slovenian impressionists, being the artists who were supposedly the first to develop a distinctive Slovenian national expression in the fine arts, however, of equal importance was also the experience of contemporary Croatian painters and theoretic work of professor Ljubo Babić. The Independents, according to the author of the article, “developed their quest for the Slovenian expression in art by relying on a certain variety of modernism as set out by the Slovenian impressionists and managed to associate it with the understanding of the national expression of their professors. Therefore, they demonstrated their own renewed Slovenian national expression in art, based on tradition, but in harmony with contemporary currents in fine arts.”

Martina Malešič, a researcher in Slovenian architecture of the 20th century deals in her study titled *From the East to the West – Year 1948 and its Echoes in Slovenian Architectural Publications* with a question on how the post-war political situation in Yugoslavia, after the conflict with Informbiro in 1948 and the Yugoslavia's departure from the Eastern Bloc is reflected in Slovenian architecture and more specially, in the journalism on architecture. Cutting the political relations with the Soviet Union had significant consequences on different levels, but it also caused cultural and artistic ties to gradually loosen. The socialist realism which was characteristic (less in architecture than in discussions on architecture) of the first post-war years in the 1950s gives way to a renewed rise of modernism. This process is outlined by the author by providing an insight into contemporary Slovenian journalism on architecture and by paying special attention to texts which display a direct reaction to the events conditioned by social circumstances. Through an analysis of the selected texts, she demonstrates how Slovenian discourse on architecture of that period changed the perception and understanding of Socialist realism and Soviet architecture, on the one hand, and modernism and Western architecture, on the other hand. At the same time she stresses that the Slovenian architectural profession decidedly advocated modernism based on the experience of modernism from the interwar period. One cannot say that this is a question of rebirth or renewal in the usual sense, because the preliminary wave of modernism actually never really faded away. It is rather a question of a transformation reflecting the historical experience of post-war Yugoslavia and dynamic cultural interchange with contemporary developments in Western Europe.

The articles of the selected authors are the result of the *First International Scientific Conference of Doctorate Candidates and younger Doctorate holders* which took place from 18th to 20th September 2014 at the Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana. The headline of the conference *Decline-Metamorphosis-Rebirth* offered a wide framework for different subject matters, perspectives and methodological approaches dealing with art. The variety of themes and interpretative approaches is reflected also in the studies presented in this edition of the *Ars & Humanitas* journal.

Translated by Mateja Petan