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Venetian Political Iconography and Architectural Decoration in Cres in the 15th Century

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Art has always been used to influence the beliefs and behaviour of others, through pointing to different issues, educating, moulding opinions, reaffirming the national feelings or persuading of existence of the gods. As such, art is in “the service of social and political change” (Moore, 2010, 7). This definition does not include only the official state iconography, but also “the ways in which visual motifs acquire an aura of association and allusion dependent upon a network of shared values and habits of interpretation” (Rosand, 2001, 1).

The Venetians used the facades as “the principal vehicles for the expression of the wealth, status and taste of their owners,” (Howard, 1987, 98) which was no different in their colonies. All regions that once belonged to the Most Serene Republic of Venice reveal some similarities in the appearance of the towns as well as in their urban patterns. Although the Venetian style, developed under the influence of the Orient (Howard, 2000, 142), became “the fashion of the times” in the colonies throughout the Mediterranean, the elements were not only used for their decorative value, but also to promote the belonging to a certain group and fawning upon the ruling powers. From the perspective of private commissions, independent of the local or state government, the choice of elements communicated catering to the wishes and tastes of the ruling power and the attempt to raise one's status. Similar was with the religious architecture, where the role of the private commissioner was taken by the bishop or the local priest, also wishing to progress in the hierarchy.

On the other hand, the style and typical solutions were also imposed by the Venetians. Venetian presence as a colonial power modified the appearance of the landscape. Some architectural changes that occurred with the new rule were only indirectly political as they were constructed for utilitarian purposes (boundaries, bridges, fortifications etc.), but they were often adorned with the most recognizable symbol of the Venetian Republic – the lion of Saint Mark. The creation and spreading of traditions were not just acts of cultural imposition. They also served the purpose



of creating the sense of unity with the mother city. Not every symbol and decorative architectural element could have been mounted on practical grounds, but the reason of their instalment had different, intellectual motivations (Warnke, 1995, 16-17), such as political propaganda. The topic of this article falls into what Barbara Fuchs called imperium studies – “a way to address the links between metropolitan sovereignty and expansion abroad and the cultural productions that sustain them both” (Fuchs, 2003, 71). The term, as she explains, underscores “the connection between internal sovereignty and external expansion” (Fuchs, 2003, 73).

This article tackles the problem of political iconography of Venice on the example of the town of Cres. Cres has been the biggest settlement and administrative centre of the island bearing the same name, located in the Upper Adriatic region of modern Croatia. The town boasts architectural decorative elements of representative qualities and recognizably Venetian character, but modified by different factors, such as contemporary economic situation, trade relationships with other regions, current social structure, geographical features (isolation of the island), available materials (stone as a major construction material), change in wealth (in the 15th century), and so on (Burchard, 1963, 6). Gothic features in the Upper Adriatic region stretch well into the 16th century, the time when the Renaissance style completely replaced the Gothic in Venice as the art centre (Howard, 1987, 102). This fact contributes to the theory of political marking of the territory through the recognizable Venetian Gothic elements, but also presents a big problem of dating of those elements with certainty, where no other material evidence exists.

The acquisition of the Adriatic coast by the Venetians started with the expedition led by the doge Pietro Orseolo II in the year 1000 AD. Towns of the Upper Adriatic welcomed the Venetian authority and accepted the protection from the State. They were mainly interested in protection at sea, which the great Venetian fleet could provide with no additional effort (Fisoli, 1937, 8). The first official domination of the Venetians over the island of Cres started in 1126 (Borić, 2002, 10). In 1190, Osor, the cultural and maritime power since the ancient times (Gorlato, 1958, 57), situated on a narrow channel dividing the islands of Cres and Lošinj, decided to pledge fidelity to King Bella III of Hungary (Mariko Miller, 2007, 71). That did not last for long since Venice was trying to regain the rule over the Upper Adriatic islands. Soon, the Venetians recaptured the lost possessions and introduced big changes to the archipelago, resulting in Osor losing its autonomy. Cres, today the biggest settlement on the island, becomes the most important administrative unit, as well as the centre of both civic and religious rule. This would eventually lead to the complete decline of Osor, abandoned from the Venetian representatives in 1450, as well as to the building boom in Cres in the 15th century (Konzervatorska podloga, 2004, 3-4; Bradanović,

2012, 452). In 1358, by the Treaty of Zadar (Zara), Venice had to give the possessions in the Adriatic to the Croatian-Hungarian Empire (Bolonić-Žic Rokov, 2002, 45). Their rule would end in 1409, when, as the result of the conflicts between Ladislaus of Naples and Sigismund of Luxembourg, Venice bought the whole Dalmatia for only 100,000 ducats (Domijan, 2001, 27). From this year, the Venetians will start the four-century long rule over the island (Konzervatorska podloga, 2004, 4), which would be visible in the appearance of the town and its urban structures. In addition, Cres would be under the strong influence from the Venetian Istria, the peninsula with which it would maintain commercial relationships (Ivetić, 2009, 256, 287). The island would keep relations with the other islands in the Upper Adriatic (Krk and Rab), the exchange that would also have an impact on the artistic expression of the region.

Just like Venetian merchants introduced the ogee arch to allude to the Orient, so did the locals employ Venetian Gothic or *gotico fiorito* to hint towards the Venetian. Nevertheless, new forms were not “invented” to serve the political purpose, but they were created as an amalgam of different impulses – the Gothic style, which was already popular throughout Europe, combined with the Oriental modes appropriated in their artistic expression (Howard, 2000, 167). Only once the forms were accepted in Venice, were they spread around the Dominion.

We can notice two phases of the interpolation of Gothic elements into the constructions. The first phase assumes pure assimilation of the new and interesting solutions coming from Venice, without the adaptation of space to the new demands. Doors and windows of Gothic characteristics were applied to the wall surfaces, without the necessary modifications and adjustments to the buildings. The second phase took place in the second half of the 15th century and implied significant architectural adaptations of houses (Perossa, 1998, 174). The latter group is significantly smaller in number and one can say that the pure renovations with addition of the Gothic elements dominate (Prelog, 1957, 65). The Renaissance influxes came to the Upper Adriatic region through connections with Senj (maintained by Rab) and through the construction of the Osor cathedral (Bradanić, 2011, 56-57).

Architectural decoration of Cres shows a plethora of typical and repeated forms shared with the entire Adriatic coast and particularly noticeable in the window decoration. They replicate the same model: window sill supported by consoles and decorated with the nail-head motif, emphasized capital zone with the same moulding and a trefoil bordered by a band of Venetian dentil motif. This typical window, built into the older structures, can be seen on three houses in Cres. The more elaborate variety, seen in other towns of the Upper Adriatic, with the

trefoil shape inscribed within an ogee arch, apparently did not find its place in the 15th-century architectural decoration of Cres. The problem of repetition of the same forms and identical windows was not an issue in the medieval times, but it served to “reaffirm the power, prestige or legitimacy of the patron by drawing visual, historical and/or political connections between the original and the copy” (Olson, 2004, 169).

In one of the narrow streets of Cres, we find a *spolia* of only a fragment of a late-15th- century Gothic window (Figure 1) with Venetian characteristics. It was built into the balcony during the Baroque renovation and probably originates from the demolished house Petris-Bochina. The fragment seems to have belonged to the elaborate tracery between two arches of a bifora window. It is bordered with Venetian dentil motif and forms a flower shape in the middle. Apart from some vague similarities with the tracery of the palace Arsan, also in Cres, it has been unparalleled in the region (Bradanović, 2002, 178-180).



Figure 1: Fragment of a Gothic bifora window, Osorska ulica, Cres,
(foto: Iva Brusic).

The above-mentioned late-15th or early-16th century palace Arsan or Marcello-Petris (Figure 2), as it is also known in the literature, is among the most representative palaces not only on the island of Cres, but in the entire Upper Adriatic region. The commissioner of the palace Arsan in Cres was the local bishop and the member of the richest patrician family of Cres, Marcello-Petris. He was widely travelled and held important functions, such as the head of the Franciscan province of Veneto. He was constantly present in Cres from 1499 and 1510. The house Arsan, now housing the local museum, was commissioned for his sister, twice married into rich patrician families of Cres: Antoniazzo de Bochina and Carvin (Gudelj-Borić, 2002, 102). Due to the significant differences in style between the west and south façades, it had been believed that the house was constructed in stages, but that was proven wrong by Gudelj and Borić (Gudelj, Borić, 2002, 98). The floors are divided by simple stringcourses. The west façade boasts two big Gothic biforas (Figure 3). The Venetian dentil motif borders both the bifora windows and the portal, which reveals early Renaissance features and bears the coat of arms of the Bochina family, belonging to the first husband of the bishop's sister, who died prior to 1498 (Gudelj, Borić, 2002, 102). The ogee arches with inscribed trefoils are found on both superposed biforas, and the space between them is filled with elaborate tracery, consisting of a quatrefoil within a circle. Similar tracery was found only in Venice and on the islands of Hvar and Korčula in South Dalmatia, but the ones from Hvar, besides stylistic, also reveal similar execution (e.g. house Jakša dated to 1475; Gudelj, Borić, 2002, 99-100). Since we know that the workshops from Dalmatia were exporting the window frames and traceries (Prelog, 2007, 145), it could be possible that even these were imported from one of them, particularly based on the similarities of motives. Jasminka Gudelj and Laris Borić proved that all of the decoration of both façades was chiselled by the same workshop, based on the material used, identical profiling and the dentils (Gudelj, Borić, 2002, 99). Furthermore, they claim that the workshop was local and that it was in charge of the 16th century decoration in Cres (Gudelj, Borić, 2002, 100). The south façade, showing Renaissance features, is more similar to the 15th-century artistic expression of the island of Rab. The characteristic columns, common for the region, are found on the corners, but in the case of palace Arsan their foliate capitals were executed with much more attention to detail than seen in other cases. Before the 15th century, the columns were created to round the sharp edges of the buildings in the narrow streets, but in the 15th century, their function became purely decorative (Prelog, 2007, 144). Having in mind the aforementioned *spolia* of the tracery, we can tell this was not a unique example in Cres and the wealthy families did use this elaborate and ostentatious forms to decorate their private residences and with them fawn upon the authorities, creating a recognizable Venetian appearance of the town.



Figure 2: Palace Arsan (Marcello-Petris), (foto: Iva Brusic).



Figure 3: Bifora window of palace Arsan (foto: Iva Brusic).

Religious motives and practices were not, as it is the case with political and administrative ones, imposed forcefully to the “colonized” region, but they still “marked the territory” and with their recognizably Venetian forms had an impact on the spectators, creating the complete image of the Venetian appearance of the towns. By incorporating the tradition of the Christian past and values into the new architecture, an attempt was made to sustain and maintain the power relations.

The chapel of Saint James (Filini, Tomaz, 1988) situated in the narrow streets in the old town of Cres, in the vicinity of the later parish church, dates to the late 14th or early 15th century. The Venetian dentil motif, one of the most commonly used decorative motives, borders the simple pointed arch portal. Apart from the portal and a lancet window above it, no other embellishment was preserved. The same motif adorns the portal of Saint Isidore, added in the 15th century on a 13th century Romanesque church, during the rebuilding of the entire west façade (Konzervatorska podloga, 2004, 126). At the same time, two small thin columns were attached to the corners of the church, the decorative element found on some private houses in Cres and in the region, such as the above-described palace Arsan.

The neighbouring town of Osor boasts one of the most important churches of the late 15th century showing Venetian Renaissance style outside of Venice (Figure 4). Its construction took place during the service of three bishops – Antun Palčić (1463-1470), Marco Nigris (1474-1485) and Giovanni Giusti (1486-1509) (Štefanac, 1986-1987, 266; Gudelj, 2008, 157). The sculptural decoration of the former cathedral has been ascribed to a notable Venetian artist Giovanni Buora (Štefanac, 1986-1987, 275-285). The influence certainly came from Venice, where trefoil façades were already seen in works of Mauro Codussi, the “first true architect of Venetian Renaissance” – on his church of San Michele in Isola (Goy, 2006, 157). It was also noticed on his and Pietro Lombardo's Scuola Grande di San Marco, on which Giovanni da Bergamo (Buora) was one of the collaborators (Goy, 2006, 191-200; Gudelj, 2008, 159). The same influence is also observable on the portal as well as in the disposition of roof sculptures (Štefanac, 1986-1987, 272-273). The church survived heavy bombing in World War II and the sculptural decoration was significantly damaged (Štefanac, 1986-1987, 263).



Figure 4: Portal of Osor cathedral (foto: Iva Brusic).

The parish church of Saint Mary in Cres, although finished a few years before, used the cathedral in Osor as a model (Gudelj, 2008, 155), which is particularly visible on the portal (Figure 5; only parts of the apses and lower part of the west façade have been preserved from the original building) (Gudelj, 2008, 153). Its construction most likely started in 1473 (Borić, 2002, 61), after the Osor church foundations and sanctuary had been laid (Štefanac, 1986-1987, 266). Two of the bishops that were involved in the construction of the Osor cathedral, Marco Negri and Giovanni Giusti (Borić, 2002, 55, 74), both of Venetian origin, were in charge of the Cres church as well. The involvement of one more Venetian, count Giovanni Longo, is confirmed by the presence of his coat of arms on the sanctuary. Right next to it is a coat of arms of the contemporary doge Agostino Barbarigo (Gudelj, 2008, 152, 162). Gudelj sees the Venetian patrician Marco Negri as a person that connects the two churches and considers him to be the ideological initiator as well as the one who chose the artists (Gudelj, 2008, 157-158). Gianna Marinelli Duda attributed the portal of the parish church to the Venetian sculptor Francesco (Marangone or Marangonić) (Duda Marinelli, 1986, 81),¹ who was less skilled than the sculptor of the Osor cathedral, Giovanni Buora (Gudelj, 2008, 159). Like the one in Osor, it also has two fluted pilasters with capitals on each side of the door, superposed by the lunette with Madonna with Child. The second lunette with a ribbed shell ornament is found above it. The decorative moulding of the architrave right above the first lunette is broken in the middle to make room for an angel figure. The two figures on top representing Annunciation, repeating the Osor example, were probably modelled after the group on the triumphal arch of the church of San Giobbe in Venice (Matejčić, 1992, 5-19). The motif of Annunciation was politically important for the *Serenissima*, since the legendary birth of Venice happened on the Annunciation day 421 AD, the same day God announced the coming of the saviour (Zorzi, 1980, 11; Ferraro, 2012, 127). By the 13th century, the motif of Annunciation was omnipresent, not only on the façade of Saint Mark's, but also around the city of Venice (Ferraro, 2012, 128). The relief of the Madonna with Child underneath it was modelled after the painting by Giovanni Bellini *Madonna degli alberetti* (Duda Marinelli, 1986, 54; Matejčić, 2004, 189-190; Gudelj, 2008, 159-160), bringing the connections with the contemporary Venetian artistic expression even closer. Jasenka Gudelj proposes that Giovanni Longo chose the Venetian details to "prove himself" before the proveditor Marco Loredan, who came for a visit in 1488 and reported on it to the doge Agostino Barbarigo. The incorporation of Bellini's work would imply fawning upon the doge, an admirer of Bellini's opus. Political intentions are even more obvious with the Barbarigo's coat of arms being incorporated on the sanctuary façade (Gudelj, 2008, 162).

1 Marijan Bradanović attributed some other sculptural work on the neighbouring island of Krk to the same author (Bradanović, 2008, 167-182). Borić attributes 38 windows and 5 portals built at the end of the 15th and beginning of the 16th century to the workshop of family Marangonić (Borić, 2002, 81).



Figure 5: Portal of Cres parish church of St. Mary of the Snows (foto: Iva Brusić).

Venice developed a set of practices used throughout the Dominion to achieve the unifying and recognizable mood, encompassing not only the decorative style, but also the urban topography, all with the goal of sustaining and maintaining the authority and functioning of the affluent Dominion. The intentions and strategies regarding the urban planning of the neighbouring island of Krk were documented in the manuscripts of the proveditor Antonio Vinciguerra, writing from the point of view of the Venetian “colonizer”, in which he indicates what should have been done to achieve the “Venetian appearance” of the town, immediately after it had been acquired in 1480 (Vinciguerra, manuscript; Brusić, 2012, 345-350; Jurišić Majer, 2012, 7-22). The proof of these intentions cannot be traced in the town of Cres in the 15th century, since the major state constructions and renovations, particularly of the fortification system, took place in the 16th century (Borić, 2011, 133-148). There are also no remains of lions of Saint Mark dating prior to 1500, as they were barbarically destroyed by certain “leontonoclasts”, who were deliberately destroying lions as symbols of the Venetian hegemony in the 19th and 20th centuries (Mitis, 1911, 137), predominantly during the emergence of the Yugoslav Illirism (Rizzi, 2001, 97). The “leontoclastia” was also a response to the Irredentist movement, directed toward the incorporation of Italian-speaking territories under the Austro-Hungarian control, into a newly formed

Italy, with the underlying idea of the identification of cultural circle with political boundaries (Ambrosio, 2001, 2). The phenomenon is very indicative of the power and importance these emblems had, even long after the fall of the Venetian Republic.

Furthermore, the imitation of the Venetian models had its deal in the establishment of power. "Power functions through imitation. [...] it is the ability to produce intended effects. Power, then, is always mimetic, since the effect is the repetition of the intention. Power works through installing effects and making them endure. Thus the monumental architectures of power, from feudal castles to modern government buildings..." (Boon, 2010, 182) "Sameness in the form of appropriation can act to reaffirm the power, prestige or legitimacy of the patron by drawing visual, historical and/or political connections between the original and the copy." (Brilliant, 2011, 169) Therefore, it is not surprising that the locals employed already existing models (such as the afore-mentioned windows, present throughout the region) when they wanted to be seen as a part of the ruling group and/or demonstrate their position in the society. Since the rulers were Venetians, Venice as a source of inspiration was the only logical choice.

In the 15th century the *Serenissima* was already well established on the island of Cres and the economic situation enabled the bigger construction projects to start emerging. This led not only to the inclusion of Venetian elements into the older structures, but also to the erection of new houses and the parish church showing Venetian features. The above examples prove that the appearance of the architecture played an important role in the medieval mind-sets. Architecture transmitted a political message to the beholders, whether they were locals or foreigners. It was used to both reinforce their position within the ruling class and to promote the personages in the eyes of the Doge. The chapel of Saint James and the windows included in the older structure show the slow introduction of the Venetian Gothic into the local building practice. Architecture was the cultural invention used to sustain the affluent Dominion. These political intentions can be particularly seen on the private house of the bishop Marcello-Petris, but even more on the parish church of Saint Mary of the Snows, where the bishop Giovanni Longo was obviously fawning upon the doge, using his favourite motives and style.

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Iva Brusić

Beneška politična ikonografija in arhitekturna dekoracija 15. stoletja v Cresu

Ključne besede: Cres, umetnost severnega Jadrana, beneška politična ikonografija, arhitektura 15. stoletja, arhitekturna dekoracija

Beneška republika je bila v Vzhodnem Sredozemlju in zlasti na Jadranu stoletja prisotna kot prevladujoča trgovska sila in pomemben umetnostni dejavnik. Njen vpliv je viden na različnih področjih umetniške ustvarjalnosti, najbolj neposredno v arhitekturi in urbanizmu. Članek se ukvarja z beneškim vplivom na arhitekturno dekoracijo stavb v mestu Cres v 15. stoletju, v času, ko Cres postane upravno središče otoka Cresa. Raziskava je osredotočena na politično sporočilo dekorativnih elementov, v katerih je mogoče razbrati namere naročnikov, da na ta način izrazijo svoj družbeni položaj oziroma opozorijo na napredovanje na hierarhični lestvici v okviru mestne uprave. Kot ključna spomenika, na primeru katerih je mogoče dokazati tezo o sporočilni vrednosti arhitekturnih dekorativnih prvin, sta izbrana palača Arsan in župnijska cerkev Svete Marije Snežne v mestu Cres.

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The Most Serene Republic of Venice was for centuries as the dominant power of the Mediterranean and its legacy can be seen, in the architecture of the towns within its sphere of influence. This article deals with the Venetian influence on the architectural decoration of the Upper Adriatic town of Cres in the 15th century. The particular problem addressed is the political message of the decorative elements, found in the intentions of the commissioners and patrons, with the aim of both reinforcement of their position as well as their progression up the hierarchical ladder of the ruling class. The examples used to prove this hypothesis are the Arsan palace and the parish church of Saint Mary of the Snows, as well as a few other elements of the architectural decoration of Cres.