

# ARCADIAN AND YUGOSLAV – (RE)SHAPING CULTURAL IDENTITY IN THE STATE ART COLLECTION IN BELGRADE

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When discussing cultural diplomacy in connection with government or state art collections, one is usually focused on the embodiments of soft diplomacy and the compilation of artifacts that were acquired as diplomatic gifts, acquisitions and commissions over the course of time. The government art collections usually function as dual mirrors, those that reflect the history of diplomatic relations through the exchange of gifts, while acting as looking glasses through which the notions of the ideal state are envisioned.<sup>1</sup>

However, the State Art Collection of the Royal Compound in Belgrade (SAC) had different patterns of development and a rather remarkable history. It was created to be an idealized presentation of the state and throughout its history represented three different political entities, two completely opposing regimes while remaining a notable art collection in its own right. We present the specific role that the State art collection played in the cultural diplomacy of the Kingdom and later the Republic of Yugoslavia, and to show how its universal artistic vocabulary was reshaped through different regimes.

When it was founded in 1929, the State Art Collection of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia was not envisaged with the complex and turbulent future that lay in front of it. From 1929 until late 1970s when the last artefact was added to the collection, it symbolically stood for all three *Yugoslavias* that evolved during this period: the Kingdom (1929/1941), the FNRJ (1945/1963) and SFRJ (1963-1991). Its artworks perpetually reflected universal and encompassing concepts of cultural diplomacy

that could be best divided into three main subjects: *the ideal state, the new Arcadia and the land of the Yugoslav nations*.

The SAC had a rich and a curious history, which is an integral, albeit neglected, part of the European cultural history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It was symbolically founded in 1929 with the proclamation of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia (previously it was the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes), and the last works were added to it in the late 1970s prior to the death of President Tito. Although by its contents and its historical importance the SAC formed a notable part of the European and Yugoslav cultural heritage, this collection was never fully researched and was virtually unknown outside, and even within the borders of Yugoslavia. It was for the first time in 2014, that a complete Catalogue of the fine arts collection of the SAC in Belgrade was printed and its artworks protected as national heritage, and finally made available to the wider local and European audience.<sup>2</sup>

From the very foundation of SAC, two elements were made remarkably clear – the methodology of its formation, and the dual course of its development. While similar institutions, as noted at the beginning of this paper, were customarily created through diplomatic gifts, the SAC was formed solely by acquisitions and commissions that aimed at reflecting the ideals that first Kingdom, and later the Republic of Yugoslavia, stood for. Therefore, the founding of the SAC did not resemble the usual founding of art museums in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, (like the pattern that was followed in the creation of the Museum of Modern Art in Belgrade in 1927) it was, in its concept, much closer to the establishment of the princely collections of the past. For that very reason, the SAC cannot be viewed in the framework of the public state collections of other European capitals (e.g. National Gallery in London or Ireland, or the Museum of Fine Arts in Budapest or Louvre...) On the contrary, it should be perceived in the context of princely collecting of the early modern era, and the formation of the state and government collections that symbolically embodied the cultural diplomacy of a particular realm. Consequently, the SAC was envisaged with a particular audience in mind – it was not a museum opened to the general public, but the state art collection established to be the part of the ceremonial space of the state in the new Royal palaces that were completed in 1929 and 1936. Although created to present the monarchy its concepts, as we

shall see later, were easily translated into the ideology of the republic of Yugoslavia under President Tito. The same collection became the scenery of many important state visits: from the kings of Bulgaria and Romania, in the 1930s to Anthony Eden, Willy Brandt, Sukarno (president of Indonesia), Seku Ture, Naser (president of Egypt), Indira Ghandi, Haile Selassie and Queen Elizabeth II...

The artifacts displayed, had to convey, to the state dignitaries and official visitors the real and desired image of the state: its place in the grand continuum of the European cultural history as well as its newly constructed identity of the Yugoslav nations.<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, from the very first acquisition the dual course of cultural diplomacy was manifest: as the virtual *alter ego* of the newly proclaimed state, the State Art Collection strove to be the personification of the ideals that shaped European cultural history as well as to represent the most excellent contemporary artists from all corners of the Yugoslav realm. Despite the radical change of the regime after WWII, the new republic of Yugoslavia only continued along this highly valued conceptual trajectory, equally aiming to position itself as both European and Yugoslav through acquisitions of some esteemed artifacts. Despite the fact that this division to the European and Yugoslav is best reflected in the formation of its fine art collection, the same pattern, is discernible in its architecture, its interior decoration as well as in the applied arts collection.

## Constructing the palaces

Two main edifices of the Royal Compound that house the State Art Collection, the Royal and White Palace also reflect this duality. Begun in 1925, and ceremonially opened on the day of the proclamation of Yugoslavia on 1<sup>st</sup> December 1929, the Royal Palace was erected to be the main residence of King Aleksandar Karađorđević. Its architects Živojin Nikolić and Vladimir Lukormiski aimed to reflect the spirit of the joint Slavic past in its architecture. It was designed in the peculiar Serbian/Byzantine style a current architectural hybrid that strove to amalgamate the legacies of the medieval Serbian past with the current

architecture. The White Palace, constructed from 1934 to 1936 by the architect Aleksandar Đorđević, was created in the Neoclassical style in order to echo the French and English palaces of the Neoclassical age. Initially designed to be only one of the residences, it became the main residence of Prince Paul during his regency until WWII and after the war continued to be used as one of the key ceremonial spaces of the republic of Yugoslavia. This carefully crafted distinction in the architectural styles fulfilled the same aim of the cultural diplomacy that would conceptually shape the State Art Collection. A deliberate creation of the Royal Palace in the unmistakably *national* style, displayed the need to bridge the temporal gap and connect the noble Medieval past with the new Kingdom of the Slavs. The materials used in its construction of Royal Palace were purveyed from all corners of the country, (the marble from Brač, onyx from Peć, sandstone from Bihać, and glass from Rogaška Slatina) thus symbolically linking all regions of Yugoslavia in the joint ideal of pan Slavism. On the other hand, the design of the White Palace in the style of neoclassicism was to present the symbolic and cultural belongingness of the young state of Yugoslavia to the great European past. This same idea would be further elaborated in the fine and applied arts of the SAC, thus creating a particular ceremonial space for the presentation of the new country.

## Founders of the SAC

Despite the pivotal, both governing and financial role, that King Aleksandar had in the formation of the SAC, the real founder, and the main connoisseur, was his cousin Prince Paul Karađorđević, who devoted much time and great knowledge, and more importantly, all of his valuable contacts into this endeavour. A notable collector himself, Prince Paul was well connected in the art world of the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>4</sup> Despite his own collection, and his subsequent ascent to the level of Regent (after the assassination of king Aleksandar in 1934) he always carefully separated his own purchases from that of the state.<sup>5</sup>

Both with his education and his career as collector, Prince Paul perfectly fulfilled the role of the main initiator of the State Art Collection.

Although he was interested in art history during his studies in Oxford, particularly the collection of the Ashmolean Museum and the National Gallery in London, he found great interest and, one could freely say, his essential vocation, in the research and connoisseurship of early modern and modern European art. During his time in Oxford Prince Paul made acquaintance that would grow into friendship with then keeper of the Ashmolean museum, Kenneth Clark,<sup>6</sup> I who would later become one of the directors of the National Gallery in London.

At the same time in Oxford, Prince Paul made another great acquaintance, with Bernard Berenson, that would leave a lasting mark both on his career as a collector and a creator of the State Art Collection. Often referred to as the ‘patriarch of Renaissance Art’, Bernard Berenson was one of the most, if not *the most* important figure in the research and market for Renaissance art in the first half of the twentieth century. Berenson greatly helped Prince Paul during the creation of the State Art Collection, often advising him what to purchase and recommending some favourable deals at the art market.<sup>7</sup> Upon his advice, some of the key Renaissance works for such as SAC were purveyed: two tondos by Biaggio D’Antonio (inv. no. 58-01) and Maestro di Tondo Campano (inv. no. 57-01), as well as the masterpieces by Palma Vecchio.<sup>8</sup>

The third collaborator and friend would prove to have the most decisive role in the creation of the SAC – one of the most important art dealers of the age, Joseph Duveen.<sup>9</sup> Often called *the prince of dealers* Joseph Duveen had a pivotal role in the making of the State Art Collection acting as one of the main purveyors and advisors for the acquisitions of early modern art. Prince Paul had such great confidence in Joseph Duveen, that he often asked Duveen to act in Prince’s name at an auction or to be a councillor in the case of important acquisitions.

It is with Duveen’s help that Prince Paul purchased for the SAC some of its most important paintings, primarily the Renaissance works from the notable Benson collection<sup>10</sup> (Palma Vecchio’s *Holy Family with St. John, St. Cathrine and the Donor* and *Portrait of the Young man* (inv. no.56-01 and inv. no.119-01), Domenico Beccafumi’s *Flight of Cloelia* (inv. no.120-01) Veronese’s *Rape of Europe* (now attributed to his son Carlo Caliari (inv. no.235-01) and Biaggio d’Antonio), as well as the masterpieces of the French Baroque classicism (Nicolas Poussin’s *Three Monks* (inv. no.241-01) Sebastien Bourdon’s *Landscape with ruins* (inv.

no.123-01). This fruitful collaboration between Prince Paul and *the prince of dealers*, grew into lifelong friendship that profoundly connected two families.

## The Pursuit of Arcadia

In the establishing of the SAC its founders respectively desired to acknowledge the long European tradition of princely collecting, and to appropriate it for the representation of their young state. However, the works collected, in particular the Old Masters and some artefacts in the applied arts collection, had another function: They were meant to symbolically emulate their Renaissance predecessors by appropriating the Renaissance notions of an ideal state, and of the Arcadian abode. Through such subtle means King Aleksandar presented himself as continuing the legacy of the Renaissance princes, while giving his newly proclaimed kingdom of the Slavs prerequisites of the ideal state, the one envisaged in the works of Renaissance humanists and depicted in the works of Renaissance masters. Carefully acquired works of Old Masters in the SAC, particularly those by Palma Vecchio, Veronese (as then attributed), Biaggio d'Antonio, Bernardo Licino or Altdorfer, exemplify not only a discerning taste of its collector, but a vision of the glorified age of statehood, the time of flourishing of the arts and patronage that early modern era stood for. Despite their diverse subject matters (religious, classical and portraiture) these works ought to give the impression to its beholder, a state official visiting the Royal courts on Dedinje, of the country deeply embedded in the long tradition of European culture, statehood, and princely patronage.

Analogous to the concept, the works from the SAC European collection transmitted another important ideal of the early modern ideology of rule – the notion of *the state as the new Arcadia*. It was particularly manifest in the grand Arcadian landscapes by the masters of French classicism – Nicolas Poussin, Francisque Millet, Sebastien Bourdon, Gaspard Dughet, Nicolas Chaperon, that all project the images of a perfected nature and the lost golden age. From the serene lakes and calm rivers, from lush trees and golden fields where shepherds ramble

with their flock; these canvases envisaged the early modern dream of the ideal land, the one that never was.

Both notions were further underlined in the interior design of the Royal Palace, of which a great part is still visible nowadays. While the White Palace was decorated in the contemporary *art deco* style, the furnishing of the Royal Palace was to project a rather different image, the one that associated the new state with the glory of the European past. Its decoration was commissioned from the most esteemed company of master carpenters and decorators from Vienna, *Bernhard Ludwig*, the courtly firm of the Austro-Hungarian Empire responsible for the decoration of many European palaces and stately homes from 1860s onwards.<sup>11</sup> By the excellence of their designs and the refinement of its pieces, *Bernhard Ludwig* company not only received the imperial warrant of the Habsburg emperor Franz Joseph, but established itself as the interior decorator of choice of the royal houses of Europe.<sup>12</sup> The virtuosity of their craftsmanship was so exceptional that they not only survived the economic crisis in the Empire, followed by the first world war, but they outlasted Austro-Hungarian Empire, and were still in business decorating the princely courts during 1920s and 1930s. However, their style was not one of the austere lines of *art deco* – *Bernhard Ludwig* offered a much grander vision, the one exemplified in the neo-Renaissance and neo-Baroque fashions of the 1800s. It is this specific feature that made it the ideal choice for the decoration of ceremonial space of the new Royal Palace of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. The entire ground floor, that functioned as *piano nobile* of the Royal Palace, as well as the first floor of the building, were transformed into an imposing tribute to the Renaissance culture, with appropriate furniture, coffered and gold plated ceilings, inlaid parquetted floors resembling great 16<sup>th</sup> century interiors and the wrought iron decorations echoing palaces of Medici or della Rovere. Despite a partial destruction of the interiors of the first floor in WWII the remaining abundant neo-Renaissance decoration of the ground floor, where nowadays the paintings by Renaissance masters are kept, could help us envisage the grandeur of the original ceremonial space projected by the founders of the SAC.

In the early 1930s an important purchase in the field of applied arts was made to complement this vision of everlasting princely ideals. On 26<sup>th</sup> June 1935, acting in the name of Prince Paul, Joseph Duveen

acquired at the sale at Jean Charpentier gallery in Paris, an impressive set of Sevres porcelain created for count d'Artois (brother of the French king Louis XVI) between 1779 and 1782.<sup>13</sup> This set was so admired by Prince Paul that he commissioned a special display case in the White Palace for its presentation in 1936. There are documents that this masterpiece of Sevres production was not only displayed, but also used for great state occasions.<sup>14</sup>

Painted in conspicuous shade of blue green and adorned with rich gilding, this particular dessert set from Sevres offered a unique set of images: it represented a veritable encyclopaedia of birds in porcelain.<sup>15</sup> The main decoration of all the dishes are carefully depicted images of diverse ordinary as well as exotic birds, carefully copied from the first encyclopaedia of the species written by Georges Louis Leclerc the count of Buffon's *Histoire Naturelle des Oiseaux* in 1749. While embodying the spirit of enlightenment in its choice of subject matter, this Sevres set was also a prized artifact of both the early modern courtly culture and of the history of cultural diplomacy. It was originally commissioned by count d'Artois as a diplomatic gift of the French crown to the Spanish court upon the occasion of the birth of Spanish infanta Marie Louise in 1782.<sup>16</sup> Due to its opulence, and the vividness of its avian protagonists, the set became the model for manufacturing of similar sets in Sevres in decades to come. Over subsequent centuries, this set had a rather long and turbulent history but it remained always known as a "Spanish diplomatic gift". Considering the particular history of this artefact, and the prestigious princely tradition of porcelain collecting at the European courts of the early modern age, it is possible that by its acquisition for the White Palace in Belgrade Prince Paul wanted to emulate those very qualities.

Although the main purchases for the European part of the fine arts and applied arts collection were conducted prior to WWII, this part of the SAC, and the concepts it conveyed, still figured importantly in the cultural diplomacy of the Republic of Yugoslavia. Several purchases of the early modern art were made during the 1960s and 1970s (Melchior d'Hondecoeter, Ackerlinge, Francesco Furini...) Only it was not interpreted in the framework of strictly princely and court culture, but much more in the context of belongingness, through great early modern collection, to the shared European cultural heritage. In the period following

WWII greater emphasis was given to the enrichment of the collection of Yugoslav art, aiming to represent the most conspicuous achievements in the field of the contemporary fine arts.

## The Unity of the Slavs

The other direction of cultural diplomacy exemplified in the fine and applied arts collections of the SAC, from its very foundation, had to recreate, albeit in the symbolic form, the imaginary artistic space of the new Yugoslav identity. It was created parallel to the European part of the Fine Arts collection and it offered the idealized vision of Yugoslav nations.<sup>17</sup> Regardless of its undisputed complexity, this part of the collection was much more straightforward in its representation. By acquisitions and commissions from the renowned Yugoslav artists, both in the pre and post WWII Yugoslavia, an imaginary portrait of the new land was being perpetually constructed.

Despite a great number of acquisitions and commissions from Yugoslav artists that both King Aleksandar and Prince Paul made in late 1920s and 1930s, one particular body of work perfectly embodied the symbolic identity of the new state of the Slavs. The appointment of the key Yugoslav sculptor of the period, Ivan Meštrović, would mark the nodal point in the process of the mythologization of Yugoslav identity.<sup>18</sup> His works would truly define the cultural diplomacy written out in the Yugoslav part of the State Art Collection and up to this day remain its undisputed masterpieces. Even before the foundation of SAC Meštrović's work was the visual embodiment of the concept of *integral Yugoslavism* (the unity of all the nations in one entity) – the same ideology upon which the image of the Yugoslav state was built upon. Hence, when king Aleksandar commissioned him to create monumental sculptures for the ceremonial space of SAC (both for the palace and its gardens) Meštrović fused some of his preexisting ideas with the needs of the state presentation. His main task was to construct an imaginary virtual past that connected all Yugoslav nations into one inseparable entity, the past that was deeply rooted in Slavic mythology as well as in the folk epics and medieval myths. In search of this joint mythology, the artist

turned to the folk epics and its two key protagonists, Miloš Obilić and Marko Kraljević, that would inspire some of the grandest sculptures he executed for the State Art Collection.<sup>19</sup>

Portraits in canvas stone and bronze by renowned artists were also meant to emphasise the national, Yugoslav, context in the State Art Collection. This is most discernible in the acquisitions of such works as the two busts of *Petar Petrović Njegoš* (bishop and poet of Montenegro) by Toma Rosandić and Ivan Meštrović's *Self-portrait* or *The History of Croatia*. By displaying the Montenegrin Bishop as a ruler and poet together with the self-portrait of a most eminent Yugoslav artist construed a nucleus of an imaginary Yugoslav spiritual and cultural pantheon.

Another important mechanism for the creation of an integrated Yugoslav identity in the SAC was the purchase of paintings that depicted landscapes and scenes everyday life of the Yugoslavs. (such as works by Matija Jama, Nicu Enea, Alexei Hansen, Anton Kos, Petar Lubarda, Lojze Dolinar, Vjekoslav Parać, etc). Although these were not necessarily the paintings with an outstanding monumental subject matter, the pieces in the Yugoslav collection were grand in their concept. All of the artifacts perceived together envisaged an image of ideal unity of all peoples of the new Republic of Yugoslavia. They presented the cultural diversity unified by the notion of the collective identity and mutual cultural heritage both Yugoslav and European.

After the death of President Tito, and furthermore after the dissolution of Yugoslavia, SAC lost a great part of its primary function. The country it was composed to represent had vanished, and consequently it ceased to be developed with new commissions and acquisitions. Nevertheless it remained the ceremonial space of the state; and also turn into a particular complex monument as well as memento of Yugoslav countries that shaped it. Although it is still occasionally used for grand state occasions, the future role of this important state collection is still to be determined.<sup>20</sup> It is our hope, as scholars, curators and researchers that SAC would become the museum and that its treasures would become accessible to the wider local and European public.

## Notes

- 1 As other state art collections they were composed also through acquisitions, commissions and more often than not theft but such instances are not going to be focus of this paper.
- 2 For the catalogue of the SAC see Todorović, Crvenković 2014.
- 3 Todorović 2014:14-41.
- 4 Archive of Yugoslavia AJ 74, Balfour, Mackay, 1980, Subotić 2011: 137-155.
- 5 See Todorovic 2014: 14-41.
- 6 About the correspondence between Kenneth Clark and Prince Paul, see „Kenneth Clark Archives“, kept in Tate Britain in London. It was upon Clark’s expert advice that Prince Paul acquired in 1921 the first important work of art for his own collection – Piero di Cosimo’s *Forest Fire*. In another interesting proof of their close friendship, and in a curious twist of faith, when Prince Paul decided to sell this painting in 1933 he sold it to Ashmolean museum and its director – Kenneth Clark. Piero di Cosimo’s *The Forest Fire* (Inv. No. WA1933.2) still presents one of the important masterpieces of museums’s collections.
- 7 Prince Paul’s legacy Archive of Yugoslavia, AJ Fund 74.
- 8 Berenson’s famous house in Florence, Villa I Tatti that up to this day serves as a centre for research of Renaissance culture. See Getty papers, Duveen Brothers records, 1925-1940, box 497, roll 352.
- 9 Todorović 2020: 211-225.
- 10 Joseph Duveen bought the entire Benson Collection in London in 1927 for 500,000 pounds only to sell its contents to some of his most valued clients including Prince Paul. See Getty Research Institute, Duveen Brothers records, 1925-1940, box 351, reel 207.
- 11 For the primary sources of the Bernhard Ludwig company see Private Archive of Bernhard Ludwig in Vienna and Archive of Yugoslavia Marambo fund, AJ 335-5.
- 12 See Windisch-Graetz, Ludwig, Bernhard Hieronymus 1972, 347 and Тодоровић/Црвенковић, 2013: 263-278.
- 13 For the primary sources see Getty Research Institute, Duveen Brothers records, 1925-1940, box 497, reel 352; documents of the Gallery Jean Charpentier for 1935 19-22. For the more extensive analysis see Biljana Crvenković 2013: 45-55; as well as her excellent monograph Biljana Crvenković 2017.
- 14 See Crvenković 2013: 53.
- 15 See Crvenković 2017.
- 16 See Crvenković 2017.
- 17 See Biljana Crvenković 2014: 18-45.
- 18 See Biljana Crvenković 2014: 18-45.
- 19 The works were meant to be synonyms with the ideology of integral Yugoslavism, despite the fact that by early 1930s they were already outdated and far removed from the current artistic practice. See Crvenković 2014: 18-45.

- 20 At present the SAC is still the part of the larger entity of the art collections of the republic of Serbia under the control of the body responsible for National collections with the headquarters in the Palace of Serbia (former SIV), while the artifacts kept in it are under supervision of the National Museum of Serbia and the Museum of Applied Arts of Serbia.

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