

# THE MAKING OF HERITAGE: A CROATIAN VASARI AND HIS 'DICTIONARY OF SOUTH SLAV ARTISTS' AS AN ESSAY IN COLLECTIVE MEMORY CONSTRUCTION

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**Abstract:** *This paper presents an analysis and interpretation of the 'Dictionary of South Slav artists', a compilation of artists' biographies by the Illyrian and later Croat nationalist Ivan Kukuljević Sakcinski. Released in 1858 after many years of research, it was modelled on earlier publication projects that had helped produce a modern literary genre flexible enough to be used to further agendas beyond a disinterested quest for knowledge. Kukuljević was a cultural-political activist intent on advancing the standing of Slavic communities in the Habsburg monarchy's south and neighbouring territories. His 'Dictionary', as I shall argue, must be understood as an essay in national pedigree building. Disputing the 'ownership' of objects, monuments and outstanding historical personalities, it promoted a sense of collective cultural self.*

"In our learned age", Ivan Kukuljević Sakcinski wrote in mid-nineteenth-century Zagreb, "there is hardly a nation with ambitions of cultural erudition that has, next to its history of art, not also a biographical work of its artists ... Only the Slavs, the most numerous nation in Europe, cannot point to similar works in the[ir] literature".<sup>1</sup> He also found this gap to be of serious consequence, being convinced that, as he wrote, "the history of art and literature sets the standard for assessing the cultural level of a people".<sup>2</sup> With his *Slovník umjetnikah jugoslavenskih* ('Dictionary of South Slav artists'), published in 1858, he sought to set the record straight. While today this work is most often remembered as a stepping stone in what came to be a historiography of Croatian art, soon superseded in terms of the knowledge it offered, my paper seeks to analyze this text not as the disinterested

- 1 "U sadašnjemu izobraženomu vieku neima skoro naroda, koj pokraj svoga zgodopisa liepieh umjetnostih, nebi imao i slovnika svojieh umjetnikah... Samo Slaveni, najveći narod u Europi, neimadu podobnih djelah u svojoj književnosti..." Ivan Kukuljević Sakcinski: *Slovník umjetnikah jugoslavenskih*. Zagreb: Tisk. Gaj, 1858, unpaginated preface.
- 2 "A ipak moramo na žalostju prineti, da je pomanjkanje takovieh djelah velika oskudica, da ne rečem sramota, jer samo po historiji znanostih i umjetnostih sudi se izobraženje i prosvjeta svakoga naroda. Da ovoj oskudici barem u ječemu doskočim, stao sam prije dvanaest godinah sabirati podatke za životopis naših jugoslavenskih umjetnikah, od kojih sam tada jedva nekoliko njih po imenu poznavao. Ali težki biaše to posao..." Ibidem.

lexical exercise as it is often portrayed, but as the product of (or even better, as an instrument in) what one might call cultural-historical activism.

I shall begin with a portrait of the author of the text and his agenda, continue with an historical analysis of the literary format in question and the use to which it has been put in various contexts, and conclude with remarks on the function and aims of the text in its specific historical context.

### THE FIRST NATIONAL ART HISTORIAN AND THE FIRST NATIONAL ARTIST

Ivan Kukuljević Sakcinski (cf. Ill. 1) had a long and productive life that began in Varaždin in 1816 and ended in 1889 in Zagreb.<sup>3</sup> A member of the Hungarian-Croatian nobility and a well-educated man, he managed to hold various positions in the provincial administration of his native province in the course of his career. He was also active in the so-called Illyrian Movement. A precursor to Yugoslavism, this movement sought to promote a greater political and cultural unison among the Habsburg monarchy's South Slavs. It was named after what was then wrongly believed to be their common ancestral group: the Illyrians, a group of tribes that had inhabited the Dinaric region in antiquity, long before the Slavic invasions.



Ill. 1. Portrait of Ivan Kukuljević Sakcinski by Josef Mukařovský (1851–1921), published in *Světozor*, 41/42 (1889), p. 389.

3 A concise biography authored by Mirko Šeper is found in the *Österreichisches Biographisches Lexikon 1815–1950*, IV, ed. Eva Obermayer-Marnach. Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1969, pp. 339–340.

The events of 1848 and the ensuing suppression of oppositional voices brought a heavy blow to the movement, whose protagonists continued their pan-Slavic activism under different precepts. Kukuljević forsook his political career during the following decade, choosing to devote himself to learning instead. He was in Vienna in 1850 when the Serbo-Croatian standard language was born; he also founded a society for research into the history of the South Slavs, which published a very important research journal; and he was there when in 1866 this society was promoted, with the emperor's consent, to become the Jugoslavenska akademija znanosti i umjetnosti (Yugoslav Academy of Sciences and Arts). Thus, while the protagonist of our story is best remembered in his native Croatia, he really must be considered a key agent in what we would now call cultural capacity building with implications not only for Habsburg Croatia and Slavonia but for the wider region.

It was in his Illyrianist phase in the 1840s that Kukuljević began collecting material for a compilation of biographies of certain artists he thought should be collectively identified with the South Slav ethnos. It took more than a decade for the project to be completed. Information was hard to come by, previous works were largely lacking, and collections of books and original works were often hardly accessible. Where too much travel would have had to be involved, Kukuljević had to rely on verbal descriptions of artworks sent to him by mail. A curious detail: he readily conceded that he himself had never before heard of most of the hundreds of artists whose biographies he collected. Not an artist himself, he felt rather ill-equipped to comment on the works in question.<sup>4</sup>

Despite all these quite fundamental hurdles, the project aroused interest long before its completion and presentation to the public in 1858. Six years earlier, there had appeared a translation "from the Illyrian" into German of the lengthy biographic entry Kukuljević wrote for one specific artist.<sup>5</sup> The weight of this individual biography was that it bequeathed the Croat nation with a "national artist", perhaps its first: Kukuljević had discovered that the roots of the Renaissance painter Giorgio Giulio Clovio (1498–1578) were not in Italy but in a mountain village not far behind Rijeka (Fiume). He left his native Croatia to train, live, and work in Venice, Florence, and Rome, where Clovio received tuition by the renowned Giulio Romano and befriended such famous artists as Michelangelo, Giorgio Vasari, Pieter Breughel the Elder, and El Greco, who also painted a portrait of Clovio. Vasari, the quasi-inventor of the historical genre of compilations of artists' biographies, called him "il più eccellente miniatore".<sup>6</sup> In sum, Giulio Clovio was a truly illustrious

4 Ivan Kukuljević Sakcinski: *Leben des G. Julius Clovio: Ein Beitrag zur slawischen Kunstgeschichte*, trans. "M. P." Zagreb: Suppan's Buchdruckerei, 1852, p. xi.

5 Ibidem.

6 Giorgio Vasari: *Delle vite de' piu eccellenti pittori, scultori et architettori*, III/2. Florence: Giunti, 1568, p. 849.

figure from the past, which any emerging nation would have been proud to count among its own.

The problem was only that, despite his origins, Clovio remained an Italian for scholars in the nascent field of art history. Kukuljević was determined to change that (Ill. 2). In all fairness to Croat nationalists, it must be admitted that Clovio's signatures often do show a degree of awareness for his origins outside Italy. His autographs occasionally contain epithets such as *Crovatinus*, *da Croazia*, *Schiavone*, *Illiricus*, or even *Macedonus!*<sup>7</sup> Yet Kukuljević searched in vain for any historical record of what he believed would be the artist's original Slavic name, which he must have abandoned after making the step to Italy. The name by which he came to be referred to in modern Croatia, *Juraj Julije Klović*, is entirely in the domain of historical fiction. However, even long before a museum called *Klovićevi dvori*, or 'Klović's apartments', opened in the 1980s in a former Jesuit monastery in Zagreb, it had become the historical truth.



Juraj Julije Klović | G. Giulio Clovio  
slikar hrvatski | Miniatore croato

Ill. 2. Portrait of Giulio Clovio from Kukuljević's *Leben des G. Julius Clovio* (cf. footnote 3), n.p.

7 Kukuljević: *Lebes des Clovio*, pp. 3–4.

## GATHERING CULTURAL CAPITAL

The essay on Clovio was only part of a larger project whose goals are best explained in the prefaces by Kukuljević and his translators. The principal target group of these texts was a German-reading audience, which they hoped to persuade that the cultural achievements of the 'South Slav people' had not been properly acknowledged in the available literature. They lament the "sorry political and geographical position" in which the "South Slav people" found itself, having to engage in a continuous struggle for the recognition of its nationality and related 'national rights'. Despite all that, it is claimed, this people had proven capable of preserving its power of mind, as best evidenced by its production of sophisticated artworks.<sup>8</sup> Now the mission was to have that acknowledged by an international audience.

In order to achieve recognition, this claim was best to be communicated in an established format: the biographical dictionary.<sup>9</sup> The literary source of this format was the collected hagiographies of saints, a format secularized for the promotion of artists' interests in Renaissance Florence in Giorgio Vasari's famous work of 1550 on "the lives of the most excellent painters, sculptors, and architects."<sup>10</sup> A little more than a century later, Vasari's format was adopted by the German painter Joachim von Sandrart, who ventured to prove in a work named *Teutsche Akademie* that great artists were not only found in Italy but also in "Teutschland".<sup>11</sup> The compilation of biographies had come to be an accepted literary format for making a certain point by presenting evidence. The eight hundred-odd biographies collected by Kukuljević were to present the evidence for his claim that the South Slav nation must be counted among those nations producing sophisticated art. Most importantly, it was to establish these individuals as the heritage of the South Slavs – not of other nations. A key part of Kukuljević's mission was to claim back all those *schiaivoni* (Slavs) from the Italians.

## SELECTION AS PRODUCTION

The final, and maybe most important, point I would like to address here is that of selection – a process that is at the core of the practice of history. There is a

8 Ivan Kukuljević Sakcinski: *Leben Südslavischer Künstler*. Zagreb: Albrecht, 1868, p. I.

9 Cf. Karin Hellwig: *Von der Vita zur Künstlerbiographie*. Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 2005.

10 Giorgio Vasari: *Le Vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori, ed architettori da Cimabue insino a' tempi nostri*. Florence: Torrentino, 1550.

11 Joachim von Sandrart: *L'Academia Todeasca della architectura, scultura & pittura oder Teutsche Academie der edlen Bau-, Bild- und Mahlerey-Künste*, I/1. Nürnberg: Sandrart, 1675, p. IX ("Durch Euch/ gleich Italien/ Teutschland sich kan sehen lassen").

certain rationale to the choice of people, things, or events, and the value given to them in accordance with a certain narrative to be promoted. This process is never disinterested, because what it echoes and produces is not an objective truth but a representation. In our case, it is thus essential to determine Kukuljević's procedure of selection. As already indicated above, he thought that the origin of individuals in the region qualified them for inclusion, irrespective of the fact that their careers were made elsewhere – usually in Italy. If artists were born outside the region to parents of South Slav origin, they were also included. Also considered were all artists born or working in what the author identified as South Slav lands. Also in terms of the kinds of arts considered, Kukuljević was rather generous: in addition to architects, sculptors, and painters – the trinity of Fine Arts in the modern period<sup>12</sup> – the *Slovník* included woodcarvers, engravers, lithographers, embroiderers, goldsmiths, and even composers, printers, and makers of organs and bells.

It appears that Kukuljević's criteria for inclusion simply reflected his intention to produce a book that was as bulky as possible: the higher the number of individuals, the stronger his argument. We must thus not be surprised to find entries for people like the thirteenth-century Carinthian painter Heinrich von Gurk or the Palermo-born musician Johann Jarnovich. Even a few female artists were included, although this was all but the rule in a nineteenth-century context. It is because of these extremely tolerant criteria of inclusion that the author managed to produce such a seemingly substantial account.

Before I conclude, it remains to be remarked that the compilation is extremely weak with regard to naming artists who worked across the border in Ottoman territory. Kukuljević did not know of even the most famous of them. The Serbs included, and usually identified as such, are usually those operating within the Habsburg framework in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Concerning the artists from his own lifetime, which are also included, he must have relied on oral information. Crucially, not a great deal of biographical information is provided about artists active in Croatia proper in any period. Kukuljević tries to pardon this by pointing to this province's population's historical role of being busy with the defence of Christianity.<sup>13</sup>

12 Cf. Paul Oskar Kristeller: "The modern system of the arts", in: *Journal of the History of Ideas*, XII (1951) 4, pp. 496–527 and XIII (1952) 1, pp. 17–46.

13 Ivan Kukuljević Sakcinski: *Kroatisch-dalmatische Künstler am Hofe des Mathias Corvinus*. Zagreb: Gaj, 1860, p. 4.

## CONCLUSION: THE BROADER CONTEXT

The development of art history as a scholarly discipline paralleled the rises of nationalism and of the bourgeoisie in the nineteenth century. It institutionalized the demarcation of borders and voiced claims for the collective ownership of objects and monuments and agents in their production, be they individuals or abstract 'spirits' supposedly underlying the cultural development of a certain group of people. Artworks, many of which were previously only accessible to a tiny segment of society, now became the heritage of a much larger part of the population that was defined not according to its monetary or symbolic power but by its membership in an ethnic community. To publish monuments or other works of art meant making them accessible to anyone wishing to 'inherit' them, which could be easily achieved by committing to a certain cultural identity. This process was facilitated by narratives devised to gloss over many often serious gaps and inconsistencies. Unfortunately, this also meant that these narratives were easily attacked, even though their representation as the canonical national truth was to shield them from being questioned.

Kukuljević's *Slovník* was successively forgotten because the narrative it used as its substructure fell out of fashion. However, we are constantly reminded that the mindset that brought about works like his is all but dead. I see it this exemplified in the rather recent 'discovery' of the potentially Croat roots of the fifteenth-century architect and sculptor Niccolò Di Giovanni Fiorentino, a.k.a. Nikola Firentinac. Again, this was not just anyone, but the author of a work of architecture so major that it was put on the list of UNESCO World Heritage Sites in 2000: the Šibenik cathedral (Ill. 3).

Thereby, its importance was universally acknowledged. When the mentioned 'discovery' was promoted in Croatian media, the Split-based daily *Slobodna Dalmacija* published a headline, formulated as an imperative, that perhaps makes clear why I think these cases can be related (Ill. 4.); it reads: "Let us claim Fiorentino's authorship of the Šibenik Cathedral!"





Ill. 3. Šibenik cathedral, drawing by Anton Weber, from *Die Österreichisch-Ungarische Monarchie in Wort und Bild*, XI. Vienna: Hof- u. Staatsdruckerei, 1892, p. 275.





Ill. 4. Article in *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 16 October 2002.

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