Women's Art Club and Women's Group Exhibitions in Zagreb from 1928 until 1940

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The Women’s Art Club and Women’s Group Exhibitions in Zagreb from 1928 until 1940

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Abstract

In 1927 Croatian painters Nasta Rojc and Lina Crnčić Virant, inspired by their British colleagues, founded the Women’s Art Club in Zagreb. From 1928 until 1940 the Club organized group exhibitions of its members. The main idea of the Club was to improve arts and crafts, to organize female exhibitions and to collaborate with other international women associations. The Club took part in the organisation of the exhibition of Bulgarian women artists and the exhibition of the Little Entente of Women held in 1938 in Zagreb. Women’s Art Club was an important factor of the female artists’ emancipation – organizing the first female group exhibitions in Zagreb.

Sažetak

Introduction*

This paper describes the role of the Zagreb Women’s Art Club in the recognition of women artists in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia from 1928 to 1940.1 The founding of the Women’s Art Club, the first exclusively women’s art association, marked a new phase in the emancipation and affirmation of women artists. The Club played an important role in organising national and exclusively women’s group exhibitions in Zagreb from 1928 until 1940 and in organising two international exhibitions in Zagreb in 1938: the Exhibition of Bulgarian Women Artists and the Exhibition of the Little Entente of Women in collaboration with the Association of University Educated Women. Although the reception of female artists varied from critic to critic, the activity of the Women’s Art Club gave not only visibility to women artists, but also access to the art market. Both Zagreb associations, the Women’s Art Club and the Association of University Educated Women, had a wider social and cultural impact, and apart from exhibitions they also organized lectures and other cultural and artistic events.

The beginning of a more intense development of cultural and artistic life in Zagreb took place in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, at the time when Croatia was still part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The turn of the century was marked with the establishment of numerous cultural institutions, thus creating preconditions and foundations for the establishment of more intensive artistic life and art market (Foundation of the Arts Society (1868), the Crafts School (1882) and the Crafts Museum (1880), etc.). It was the time when the first Croatian artists, painters and sculptors, who were educated at the European academies (Vienna, Munich and others), returned to Zagreb. For their needs, art studios were built in 1895, and these were later at the core of the construction and development of the future Academy of Fine Arts, which opened in 1907 as the Temporary High School for Arts and Crafts.

The construction of the Art Pavilion, the first dedicated exhibition venue in Zagreb, proved to be of crucial importance for the development of exhibition activities and, consequently, art markets. The Art Pavilion, with its construction transported from the Millennium Exhibition in Budapest in 1896, was ceremoniously opened in 1898 with the exhibition of the Croatian Salon, a manifestation which exhibited the young generation of Croatian artists, led by the painter Vlaho Bukovac,2 founder of the Society of Croatian Artists in 1897, which separated from the old Art Society.

The Art Pavilion was the venue where were the Society of Croatian Artists’ held exhibitions, numerous group and solo exhibitions of local and foreign artists, as well as four of the six Zagreb exhibitions of the Women’s Art Club, starting with the first in 1928. Ten years later, in 1938, a large exhibition of the Little Entente of Women was held at the Art Pavilion as well. Today, with 120 years of tradition, it is still one of the most reputable exhibition venues in Zagreb.

In 1909, the first private art gallery, Salon Ullrich3 in Ilica Street 54, opened in Zagreb. Its owner Antun Ullrich expanded his glassware manufacture of framing paintings to selling and exhibiting art works. From 1926, Antun’s son Edo Ullrich continued his father’s work by opening the second Salon in Ilica Street 40, and after closing of Antun’s Salon in 1927, Edo’s Salon Ullrich would lead his Salon until its nationalization in 1947. Edo Ullrich’s Salon in Ilica Street 40 was the place where the first major international women’s exhibition in Zagreb was held, the exhibition of Bulgarian artists.

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1 On 29 October 1918, at the session of the Croatian Parliament, the conclusion was reached on the termination of all Croatian state legal relations with Austria-Hungary, and the creation of a common state of Croats, Slovenes and Serbs, and it was to unite with the Kingdom of Serbia. Two months later, the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes was recognized internationally in 1919. Ten years later, in 1929, King Alexander declared the dictatorship and abolished the parliamentary congregation (6th January Dictatorship) and was proclaimed as the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. That state fell in 1941 and what followed were Federal People’s Republic of Yugoslavia (1945-1963) established after the Second World War and Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (1963-1992), More in: Hrvoje Matković, Povijest Jugoslavije (1918-1991-2003), (Zagreb: Naklada Pavličić, 2003).

2 Vlaho Bukovac (1855-1922) studied in Paris at the École nationale des Beaux-Arts until 1880. In 1903 he took up residence in Zagreb and in 1897 with other young artists he founded the secessionist Society of Croatian Artists.

3 “Salon Ullrich, prva zagrebačka privatna galerija”, Fine Arts Archives of the Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts, accessed 15 March 2018, dizbib.hazu.hr/ullrich/
in 1938. Both Ullrich salons were very important places for art market in Zagreb.

**Women’s Art Club, 1927-1942**

At the beginning of the 20th century, there were about a dozen active women artists in the Zagreb’s art scene, mainly members of the noble or upper class of society, some of whom were members of the Arts Society and the Society of Croatian Artists and participated in their group exhibitions at the Art Pavilion. Some of them also held solo exhibitions at Salon Ullrich for a couple of years after its opening, and although still in the shadows, they had actively participated in the artistic life of Zagreb since the beginning of the 20th century. The artists in question acquired their artistic education in Vienna, Munich or in private painting schools in Zagreb since the Academy of Fine Arts in Zagreb did not open until 1907.

It was this generation of women artists, led by painters Lina Crnčić-Virant and Nasta Rojc, that was to make a step forward in the affirmation of women’s art with the founding of the Women’s Art Club in Zagreb in 1927, primarily by organising group women’s art exhibitions that had not taken place until then in Zagreb exhibition scene.

From the beginning of the 20th century, up until the 1920s and the time of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, women’s associations were predominantly charitable in nature, for example, the Croatian Woman (Hrvatska žena) or the Croatian Heart (Hrvatsko srce). After 1920 women’s associations were becoming more and more professional. In addition, with the new state of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (Kraljevina SHS) in 1919, the number of women’s associations increased significantly; in the People’s Union of Women’s Associations in 1919 there were 50 registered associations, and already one year later there were over 200. Thanks to professional women’s associations – the Women’s Art Club and later through joint collaboration with the Association of University Educated Women (founded in 1927 in Belgrade, and very quickly its section in Zagreb) – the first all-women exhibitions were organized in Zagreb.

The Women’s Art Club (Knjigovnih umjetnica) is considered to be the first exclusively women’s art association founded in Croatia. The most valuable information about its activities can be found in the archival material of the Club. The reason for this is that art historians in the decades following its dissolution did not deem it worthy of further research. Besides the aforementioned archival material, other perspectives can be found through discourse analysis of the then-contemporary news articles with strongly ambivalent attitudes towards women artists, as well as artist monographs of several members and occasional mentions in overviews about Croatian art history.

At the beginning of 1927, Lina Crnčić-Virant and Nasta Rojc invited colleagues who were at that point known for their work. The beginnings of activities had been characterized by difficulties in the field of relations with individual institutions and other cultural and artistic associations, in addition to traditional and patriarchal prejudices that were inevitable for all women, especially when it comes to acting in the field of public or professional work. Representatives of artistic crafts who worked within the association “Djelo” were

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4 The first female solo exhibition at Salon Ullrich was the exhibition of painter Nasta Rojc in 1911.
6 Lina (Karolina) Crnčić-Virant (1879-1949), a Croatian painter, she studied at the private painting school Crnčić - Bukovac in Zagreb. She is one of the founders of the Women’s Art Club.
7 Nasta Rojc (1883-1964), a Croatian painter, engraver and sculptor. She studied with Oton Iveković, (Zagreb, 1901/1902); with Tina Blau Lang, (Vienna 1904/1906), Kunstschule für Frauen und Mädchen, (Vienna, 1902-1904 and 1908-1911), Frauen Akademie, (Munich, 1907). She is one of the founders of the Women’s Art Club.
10 The initiative and visit to Belgrade by the President of the International Federation of University Educated Women (founded in 1919) resulted in the establishment of the Yugoslav Association in 1927 in Belgrade and its joining to the International Federation of University Women. Soon after, sections were established in other Yugoslav cities (Zagreb, Ljubljana, Skopje, Šabac, Novi Sad, Sarajevo). Andrea Feldman, “Prilog istraživanju ženskih organizacija – Udržanje univerzitetskih obrazovanih žena”, in Žena i društvo kultiviranje dijaloga (Proceedings), eds. Rade Kalan, Željka Sporer, (Zagreb: Croatian Sociological Association, 1987), 62.
11 It is in the holdings of the Fine Arts Archives of the Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Zagreb, Croatia.
12 In a manuscript titled “Povijest osnutka Kluba likovnih umjetnica”, which is kept in the holdings of the Fine Arts Archives of the Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts,
invited to join the Club, but the archival documents of the Club state that their parent association forbade membership to the Club and its female members were therefore not among its founders. The same fate was also experienced by the Professor of the Academy of Fine Arts Olga Höcker who was also banned from joining the Club. Nevertheless, she was the author of the poster for their first exhibition (Fig. 1).

Figure 1. Olga Höcker poster for the first exhibition of the Women’s Art Club held in the Art Pavilion in Zagreb in 1928. Kovačić Mihočinec Collection, Zagreb.

The Rules of the Club were made on 3 January 1927, and they were confirmed by the Ministry of Interior Affairs in Belgrade ten months later, on 11 November, officially starting the activity of the Club. There are no details on why the Rules were approved with such delay, but the result was that the first exhibition of the Club was set up one year after its establishment.

The main task of the Club was to “promote all art and artistic crafts that would be realized through the organization of exhibitions, lectures, maintaining relations with other associations and establishing other clubs.”13 The wish was that similar clubs would be founded in Belgrade, Dubrovnik, Ljubljana and Sarajevo. So, apart from exhibitions, the phenomenon of this association has to be seen in the context of time and the international connections of its members (especially the relationship with the British association that was a paragon for its establishment – Women’s International Art Club - WIAC), as well as the desire to educate the public about art. The charitable character of the Club was to be manifested through activities related to its exhibitions.

According to recent research of the archival material, 49 artists had been members of the Club in either “permanent” or “temporary” member categories. The categories of “friends” and “sponsors” also appear in the Club’s records.14 Fifteen artists presented their works at the First Exhibition of the Club in 1928; an increase of members to 23 is evident at the Second Exhibition in 1930. Around 1935, according to the Records the Club had 30 members. The largest number of members was in 1937 when fifteen regular, nineteen temporary and one honorary artists of the Club were registered as members.

Through twelve years of various activities, formally from 1927 to 1942, the Women’s Art Club organized eleven exhibitions:

1. First Exhibition of the Women’s Art Club, Zagreb, October 1928
2. Second Exhibition of the Women’s Art Club, Zagreb, October-November 1930

Zagreb, Croatia, Nasta Rojc states: ‘Among the invited artists, there were also artists of the artisan association “Djelo”. However, they were prohibited from entering the Club and therefore none of them is among the founding members”.

13 Copy of The Rules of the Women’s Art Club is in the holdings of the Fine Arts Archives of the Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Zagreb, Croatia.
14 The Fine Arts Archives of the Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Women’s Art Club fond and the Club catalogues were the primary source for this research.
3. Third Exhibition of the Women’s Art Club, Ljubljana, August-September 1931
4. Fourth Exhibition of the Women’s Art Club, Osijek, March 1932
5. Fifth Exhibition of the Women’s Art Club, Zagreb, October 1932
6. Sixth Exhibition of the Club of Fine Artists, Sušak, November-December 1932
7. Seventh Exhibition of the Women’s Art Club, Zagreb, November 1933
8. Eighth Exhibition of the Women’s Art Club, Zagreb, September-October 1935
9. Ninth Exhibition of the Women’s Art Club, Dubrovnik, May 1937
10. Jubilee Exhibition of the Women’s Art Club, Zagreb, September-October 1939
11. Tenth Exhibition of the Women’s Art Club, Osijek, May-June 1940

The Club at that period was ever present in daily and weekly newspapers, and art critics – depending on their attitude to the position on women in society and the position of women artists in public sphere – were divided. Discourse analysis in both affirmative and negative reviews reveal the same strategies – one of which is most prevalent and demands from women artists to reveal their gender identity through their work, so that the male gender could be affirmed as universal. Art critics inevitably use the term “female artist”, clearly distinguishing them from “artist” – the term of normative discourse that implies that the artist is a man and does not require further determinants. In the positive (or neutral) criticism that most often prevails, this gender determinant is observed as a positive quality, while the same principle in negative reviews is used to negate women’s newly acquired position on the art scene. Art critics, mostly male artists themselves, saw the Club as unwelcome competition on the art market. Women usually sold their work for a cheaper price, and their canvases were smaller as they were usually painting “the allowed” genres for women: landscapes and still lifes.

Gender inequality on the art market can be observed from comparing acclaimed male and female artists (Ljubo Babić and Nasta Rojc respectively) and the prices of their works in the same year. In 1932, both artists exhibited their works on group exhibitions; Ljubo Babić in Zagreb’s Art Pavilion along with three other male artist, and Nasta Rojc in Osijek with the Women’s Art Club. The prevailing genre of their oil paintings is landscape, mostly maritime. The average price for Babić’s works is 4,000 dinars, whereas for Rojc’s is around 2,000 dinars. Roughly speaking, the price of women artists’ oil paintings was about half the price of those by male artists. The only exception is Rojc’s portrait of His Majesty the King Alexander at an astounding price of 26,000 dinars. At the time Nasta Rojc had already made her name in portraying the upper echelons of the society, and due to her and her partner Alexandrina Onslow’s connections to the Court, as well as Her Majesty the Queen Maria’s patronage to the Club’s exhibitions in 1930 and 1935, she had access and was commissioned for portraits of the country’s nobility.

Power relations between art and cultural institutions, including art critics, and their influence on acceptance of the Women’s Art Club led to it being negated its public role, its members’ artistic competence as well as contemporaneity, which resulted in their absence from national art history following its dissolution. Only recently their role in the art scene of the interwar period has been acknowledged.

15 For the purpose of dissertation research on the history and reception of the Women’s Art Club, more than 100 articles in then-contemporary daily and weekly newspapers and journals were gathered and analysed. Ongoing dissertation research: Dunja Nekić, Reception of the Women’s Art Club activities from the beginning of the 20th century until today, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Zagreb.

16 Ljubo Babić (1890-1974) was a Croatian painter, graphic artist, theatrical set and costume designer, teacher, art historian, critic, and museum curator. As an art critic he was extremely negative in his articles on women in arts, especially in fine arts, and through positions he held in various institutions he effectively undermined the Club’s efforts to leave a mark in Croatian art history by excluding its members’ oeuvres from subsequent overviews of art history in Yugoslavia.

17 It is interesting to note that the yearly salary of another male artist who was also a professor at the Academy of Fine Arts in Zagreb, Rudolf Valdec, was 11,400 dinars for the year 1928 (Decree from 14 March 1928, Request of Rudolf Valdec, Fine Arts Archives of Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts), which was quite low in comparison with the price of art works at the time for both genders. It is reasonable to conclude that all artists employed or not, depended on sale of their works for their livelihood.

18 HM Queen Maria was the daughter of HM King Ferdinand of Romania and HM Queen Marie of Romania (a daughter of HRH Prince Alfred, Duke of Edinburgh, and a son of Queen Victoria of the United Kingdom). The Queen was born in Gotha, Thuringia, Germany 6 January 1900 and died in London 22 June 1961. Her Majesty married HM King Alexander I of Yugoslavia in Belgrade 8 June 1922 and they had three sons Crown Prince Peter (later HM King Peter II, father of HRH Crown Prince Alexander II), Prince Tomislav and Prince Andrej. Accessed 19 September 2018 http://www.royalfamily.org/dynasty/hm-queen-maria-of-yugoslavia/
come into focus of a few art historians who research the subject of women's art. The activity of the Club officially ended at a meeting held on 21 July 1942, although the last mentioned exhibition was held in 1940 in Osijek.

Pars Pro Toto – Nasta Rojc and the position of women artists

One of the most important members of the Club was Nasta Rojc (Fig. 2). Painter, engraver and sculptor, she was also the co-founder and the secretary of the Club, who played a key role in its establishment due to her previous artistic successes and social influence in the higher echelons of society. The pre-history of the Club is mainly linked to her artistic work and social connections, thus her life and work shall be presented in more detail. Nasta Rojc was born on 6 November 1883 in Bjelovar (Croatia), to a distinguished civic family. Despite her father’s opposition, Milan Rojc, then Minister of Religious Affairs and Education, she attended the private art school of Oton Iveković between 1901 and 1902 in Zagreb. Her art education continued at the Kunstschule für Frauen und Mädchen in Vienna from 1902 to 1904 and from 1908 to 1910, and at the Frauen Academy in Munich in 1907. In her works, academic realism, plein-air painting and symbolism are intertwined, best recognized in her works in genres of portraits and landscapes. Recent research regarding the life and work of Nasta Rojc in private archives, especially her unpublished journal, has also uncovered that during her education in Vienna she had taken courses in photography in Kolnergasse Strasse No. 6, the address of what was to become the Wiener Camera Club.19 Nasta Rojc led a quite unconventional life for the period. She had been married to Branko Šenoa, a well-known Croatian artist and Professor at the Academy of Fine Arts in Zagreb since 1910, however theirs was de rigueur marriage, since Nasta had been in open relationship since the beginning of the 1920s with Alexandrina Dunja Nekić, "Negativi na staklu Naste Rojc – osobni arhiv umjetnika kao pomoć pri kronološkoj obradi opusa = Nasta Rojc’s glass plate negatives – artist’s personal archive as an aid in chronological treatment of an oeuvre", Peristil, no. 55 (2012): 129-136.

Due to her lifestyle, it can be presumed that Nasta left the role of President of the Club deliberately to Lina Crnčić-Virant, who was married to a respected artist Menci Clement Crnčić – in order to provide a more acceptable media image of women artists for the public. Even though Nasta Rojc was without

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doubt a better artist and had stronger social relationships, she consciously accepted the role of the Secretary of the Club for almost the whole duration of its existence. Of all the members of the Women’s Art Club, Nasta Rojc was and remains the most familiar name in the wider public, and her popularity has increased in the last twenty years since the first major posthumous retrospective exhibition prepared by Đurđa Petravić-Klaić in the Art Pavilion in 1997. The second major retrospective was held in the same institution in 2014.

On the occasion of the Club’s first exhibition, probably due to wide interest of the public and other artistic associations as well as a reaction to male colleagues who published their opinion on the subject, Nasta Rojc had written an article entitled Izložba likovnih umjetnica: Povodom izložbe likovnih umjetnica20 in the monthly journal Ženski list. In it she directly responded to social and artistic criticism from her male colleagues by explaining the sequence of events that led to the establishment of the Club. It is worth noting that Nasta Rojc, almost apologetically, began her story by stating that she would not like “our male counterparts to think that we are organized against their efforts”. Rojc continues on how the foundation of the Club was preceded by her solo exhibition in London. The circumstances in her private life had led Nasta Rojc to move to Britain for a year, among other reasons, for a change of climate in order to improve her health, which ailed her during the whole lifetime. Nasta’s solo exhibition was held in June 1926 at the Gieves Art Gallery in London, and upon receiving positive criticism she was invited to exhibit 18 paintings at the Women’s International Art Club exhibition in London (Fig. 3).

I remembered at that moment that it would be more convenient if my artistically gifted homeland was represented by several artists, and I agreed to show only four paintings from my exhibition for my future exhibition provided my permission to fill the number with the paintings from my colleagues. Upon returning to Zagreb, there was a considerable difficulty in collecting these works, so Mrs. Lina


Crnčić-Virant suggested that we should establish a club, in which we could all meet and support each other in this difficult time when our strong colleagues could not stand out and arrange large exhibitions. The first result was that the four of us exhibited in London, and the other was that we were already assembled into one club and were all in agreement and in line to set-up the first exhibition of the Women’s Art Club.21

Figure 3. Nasta Rojc, poster for solo exhibition at Gieves Art Gallery, London, 1926. Kovačić Mihočinec Collection, Zagreb.

Exhibition of Bulgarian Women Artists in Zagreb 1938

The exhibition of Bulgarian artists, who were members of the art section of the Bulgarian Women’s Association with Higher Education, was held at the end of 1937 in Belgrade, and then in January 1938 in Zagreb. It was the result
of international cooperation between the two women’s associations, the Association of Women with Higher Education of Sofia and the Association of University Educated Women of Belgrade. Their exhibition in Zagreb was a project on which Zagreb Women’s Art Club was also involved. The purpose of the exhibition was cultural and intellectual cooperation and rapprochement between Bulgarian and Croatian intellectuals and artists, as stated in the Association of University Education Women of Zagreb call letter for cooperation with the Zagreb Women’s Art Club. It was certainly the consequence of concluding a bilateral agreement on mutual peace and friendship between Yugoslavia and Bulgaria in 1937.

Belgrade’s exhibition of Bulgarian painters and sculptors was initiated by the Belgrade association, and was followed by the initiative to move the exhibition to Zagreb: “The Association of University Educated Women of Zagreb invited a group of Bulgarian women artists ‘after a morally and materially successful’ exhibition in Belgrade, to arrange an exhibition of their works here”. The Women’s Art Club also played its role in the organization and realization of the Zagreb exhibition, since the Association of University Educated Women instantly invited them to cooperate and help with the organization of the exhibition.

The exhibition was held in the private gallery of Edo Ullrich in January 1938, and 101 artworks by about 40 Bulgarian artists were exhibited. The works ranged from applied art (ceramics, handicrafts) to paintings (oil, pastel, watercolour) and sculptures. Most of the paintings were in the genres of portraits, landscapes and still lifes. And as journalists in then-contemporary press noted, individual styles were clearly visible: Realism, Impressionism, and Expressionism with the special category of national motives.

Exhibited works were for sale, and during the exhibition about a dozen were sold, with works of applied art attracting the greatest interest. However, several paintings were also bought, two of which for city’s institutions; the City Assembly and the Modern Gallery. The City Assembly purchased Ruska Marinova’s portrait of the Bulgarian writer Yana Yazova, and the Modern Gallery purchased the work entitled Landscape by Olga Bagrianova, which is still in its holdings. The prices of artwork ranged from 70 dinars for the works of applied art to 2,500 dinars, as was the price of Bagrianova’s painting, which is a significantly lower price compared to the prices achieved by the paintings at the exhibition of Little Entente of Women, which shall be discussed later.

The exhibition attracted a lot of publicity, thus during the time of the exhibition Zagreb’s daily newspaper Novosti published interviews with the two artists who were engaged in its organization and on that occasion stayed in Zagreb – the president of the art section of the Association of Women with Higher Education of Sofia, Radka Paševa and the painter Ruska Marinova. “In the words of Paševa, Bulgarian artists do not just want to show Bulgarian contemporary art, both in Belgrade and Zagreb exhibitions, but they also want to establish the international affiliation of women artists on national and cultural basis […], by bringing in their art also the art of their regions as well”.

From the interview with the painter Ruska Marinova in Zagreb’s Novosti, we learn more about the art section of the Bulgarian Association of Women with Higher Education founded in 1928.

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22 Letter by Margita Čeh, president of the Association of University Educated Women, Zagreb Section, sent to Women’s Art Club on 27 December, 1937. It is in the holdings of The Fine Arts Archives of the Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Women’s Art Club fond, ARLUKUM.
25 Compared to the prices of other artists on various exhibitions, the higher price range for an oil painting was roughly 1,500-3,500 dinars, but some acclaimed local artists in the salon Ede Ullrich sold their works at a price for over 10,000 dinars. Source: Salon Ullrich Book of Exhibitions / Fine Arts Archives of Croatian Academy. If we compare this with the average annual salary of senior civil servant in 1938, who earned 44,000 dinars per annum, we can calculate the ratio of about four major paintings for one average annual salary.
26 Ibid.
Members of this section were artists from all over Bulgaria, about 60 of them who held group sales exhibition each year with great success. Marinova also explains how the older generation of painters studied mainly in Russia with shorter stays in Germany, while the younger generation was in Germany, but also in Paris and Italy. The situation and position of women artists in Bulgaria was similar to that of Yugoslavia: “After completing their studies, some of our painters were devoted partially to various teaching professions, while others worked freely. [...] Among the painters those who involved themselves with portraiture led the best lives”.\textsuperscript{28} Being one of the most important portrait painters represented at the exhibition (Fig. 4), Ruska Marinova portrayed members of the Bulgarian royal family, and she was educated as a painter in Paris, Italy and Germany.

In addition to the exhibition itself, accompanying events were organized, such as the Bulgarian Evening, Evening of Croatian Literature, and the Evening of Croatian Music, through the efforts of several women’s associations, as well as individuals – the Association of University Educated Women, the Women’s Art Club, the Society of Croatian Writers and conductor Ivana Fischer. This bilateral alliance meant the connection and cooperation of the national women’s associations with the aim of women’s emancipation, but in a certain way it also meant the continuation of cooperation and aspirations for connecting South Slavic peoples dating back to the Lada Society in 1904.\textsuperscript{29}

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{29} Lada was the association of South Slav artists founded in 1904 in Sofia. It included Serbian, Croatian, Slovenian and Bulgarian artists which organized exhibitions until 1922 when the association became exclusively Yugoslav.
Little Entente and Little Entente of Women

Towards the end of the First World War there was the idea of establishing the Little Entente, an alliance that would be “the ideal for peace and new order”, an association between Czechoslovakia, Poland, Romania, Greece and the Yugoslav countries: “This alliance served to protect the interests of these small states in the Balkans, the Danube Region and Central Europe”. The idea was based on solidarity and mutual help. The Alliance was later established, to a lesser extent than the original idea, without Greece and Poland, through a series of bilateral agreements between the three countries: the Kingdom of SHS (Slovenia, Croatia and Serbia), the Republic of Czechoslovakia and the Kingdom of Romania. These agreements were made in the period from 1920, when the Kingdom of SHS and Czechoslovakia concluded the alliance, and 1921 with Romania and the Kingdom SHS doing so as well. The purpose of the alliance was a joint defensive agreement between the three countries aimed at defending themselves against Hungarian and German domination in the Danube region, also with the aim of preserving the borders and the political unity of these countries in the event of a Habsburg restoration.

In the beginning, the Little Entente was actually a “sequence of bilateral agreements linking three countries (Czechoslovakia, Romania and the Kingdom of SHS)”. The Little Entente of Women was founded in 1923 in Rome at the Ninth Congress of the International Alliance for Women’s Suffrage as an alliance of women’s organizations aimed at interconnecting and collaborating with feminists of the Slavic and Balkan countries: Romania, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Greece and Yugoslavia. At the time of its establishment, the Little Entente of Women had more members than the political Little Entente, as Poland and Greece were members of the former.

The Yugoslav delegation at the Congress in Rome was represented by members of the Yugoslav Women’s Federation and the Women’s Movement, as the idea and the purpose of the Little Entente of Women was to support and fight for the strengthening of women’s emancipation on a social, economic and political level. Delegations of national women’s associations had thus formed a basis for mutual cooperation and assistance on issues of emancipation and gender equality, the exercise of political and civil rights, protection of women and children, assistance to women in professional advancement etc. Other goals also included pacifist efforts and helping to preserve peace among the members.

During its foundation, it was decided that Conferences of the Little Entente of Women would be held annually in different country, starting from the first one held in Bucharest (1923), then Belgrade (1924), Athens (1925), two in Prague (1927-1928) and Warsaw (1929). Already during the first conference in Bucharest in 1923 it was decided that during the second conference in Belgrade, as a complementary program, the exhibition of women’s crafts was to be organized (characteristic national motifs, embroidery, lace and so on) by all member countries for the purpose of better mutual acquaintance and convergence.

The exhibition was set up in the women students’ home of Belgrade’s high school. In addition, a smaller exhibition of painters’ and sculptors’ works by Yugoslav artists was organized, where for the first time exclusively women’s artistic achievements were shown. In addition to this art exhibition, there was also an exhibition of the literary works by Serbian, Croatian and Slovene women.

At the third conference of the Little Entente of Women in Athens, in 1925, a similar exhibition of women’s craft by Greek artists was organized, as well as the exhibition of paintings by artists from different countries of the Little Entente of Women. They were led by the idea that “[...] art could contribute to the dissemination of both the

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30 Bogdan Krizman, Vanjska politika jugoslavenske države 1918 – 1941 (Zagreb: Školska knjiga, 1975), 32.
31 Ibid.
32 Krizman, Vanjska politika jugoslavenske države 1918 – 1941, 36.
33 -, “Izložba,” Ženski pokret, (December 1924), 428.
feminist and the pacifist goals of the Women's Petite Entente [...].34

After the Warsaw Conference in 1929, the economic crisis struck, and national organizations found it increasingly difficult to send their delegates to conferences abroad. In addition, all member states had increasingly strengthened their positions in the International Alliance for Women's Suffrage, so there was no need for a special feminist organization, which was used to explain the "halt" in work from 1929 until 1934. During this meeting in 1934 in Paris, representatives of national women's federations (Yugoslavia, Romania and Czechoslovakia), made a decision that the Little Entente of Women should continue to work as an organization of the National Women's Associations of the Little Entente countries. Greece left the alliance, the Polish organizations broke up and since that time, the Little Entente of Women was made up of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, the Kingdom of Romania and the Republic of Czechoslovakia.35 The great traveling exhibition of the Little Entente of Women, whose first station in January 1938 was Belgrade, was the first major project of the reorganized Little Entente of Women.

The exhibition of the Little Entente of Women in Zagreb, 1938

In addition to their regular group exhibitions, the Women's Art Club and its members, at the initiative of the Yugoslav Women's Federation, participated in the exhibition as well in the aspect of organizing the great international women's exhibition of Little Entente of Women in 1938 in Zagreb.

Since the first congress of the Little Entente of Women, exhibitions of women's art were held as an accompanying program in Belgrade and Athens, while in 1937 the main project was precisely the organization of the great travelling exhibition in 1938. At the congress of the International Women's Association, the idea of organizing a group exhibition was born to exhibit the works of artists from countries of the Little Entente of Women (painting, sculpture and architecture). The initiative for this type of exhibition was given by Františka Plaminkova (1875-1942), a Czech suffragette, who at that time chaired the Little Entente of Women. The aim was to present the artistic work of artists from Czechoslovakia, Romania and Yugoslavia. The financing of the exhibition, the cost of renting exhibition venues, insurance and transportation were taken over by each national affiliate of the Little Entente of Women. Apart from encouraging the spirit of friendly relations between member states, the organizers saw the exhibition as, among other things, a useful tool for the feminist movement to show women their abilities both in the organisation of the event itself and in the artistic field of activities.36 The exhibition was held in nine cities, three in each country: in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia (Belgrade, Zagreb, and Ljubljana), the Kingdom of Romania (Bucharest, Cluj, Cernautz), the Republic of Czechoslovakia (Prague, Brno, Bratislava).

The first in a series of the Little Entente of Women countries in which the traveling exhibition was to be held was the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, and the first exhibition opened in January 1938 in Belgrade in the Cvijeta Zuzorić Pavilion. The specificity of this exhibition was that all branches of artistic creation, from painting, sculpture and architecture, were represented, providing a rare example of the presentation of women's architectural works. It is important to note that the entire project was realized under the patronage of the highest representatives of all the participating countries: Queen Maria of Yugoslavia, Queen Maria of Romania and Hana Benešová, wife of Czechoslovakian President.


36 Memo by the Yugoslav Women Alliance – Little Entente of Women to painter Cata Dujšin, dated 6 November 1937. It is in the holdings of The Fine Arts Archives of the Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Women’s Art Club fond, ARLIKUM.
In the Yugoslav part of the exhibition, Croatian, Serbian and Slovenian artists were included, and for the participation and selection of Croatian artists, as well as for writing the foreword in the exhibition catalogue, the Yugoslav Women’s Association commissioned the Zagreb Women’s Art Club. At the end of 1937, the Women’s Art Club in Zagreb received a notice from the Yugoslav Women’s Federation from Belgrade through the Zagreb section, which was then presided over by Danica Bedeković, to provide funding for Yugoslav participation at the Little Entente of Women Exhibition and to invite them to participate in the organization of the exhibition.

The selection of works for the exhibition was left to the artists themselves, believing that the task would be taken seriously because it was “the representation of the country and artistic culture of our women.” At the Women’s Art Club meeting it was decided that each member should be represented with one work. In addition to members of Women’s Art Club, other artists were invited to participate in the exhibition. Complete preparation of the Yugoslav section took place within a very short time of just one month, and the foreword to the catalogue was to be written in only three days (Fig. 5). For that work the Women’s Art Club employed the art historian and journalist Zdenka Marković. Originally the foreword to the catalogue was to be written by the Women’s Art Club member Roksana Cuvaj Zurunić, painter and art historian, however as she was in Paris at the time and due to a short deadline, Zdenka Marković was hired – the text was supposed “[...] to include an overview of modern art and the participation of women in it.”

The exhibition of the Little Entente of Women in Zagreb was a continuation of a series of women’s exhibitions which started the same year with the exhibition of Bulgarian artists:

This year’s artistic season is in a sign of women’s manifestations [...]. In most countries a woman has no access to public art works (decorations, monuments); in division of scholarships woman is usually denied, her education is not systematic, works are not purchased, etc., many of these moments evoke negative feelings in a woman and a suspicion of belief in her own possibilities.
The Zagreb exhibition was opened in the Art Pavilion on 13 February 1938, and the opening ceremony was attended by representatives of all associations, with President Leposava Petković and Secretary General Zora Knežević in front of the Yugoslav Women’s Association, as well as numerous representatives of the Zagreb consulates of member countries. The entire protocol was at the highest level and the exhibition was solemnly opened by Ban Viktor Ružić himself. A few days after the opening of the exhibition, a formal reception was organized by the Yugoslav Women’s Alliance for the Savska Banovina. The highest representatives of the city and state structures participated, along with the Ban Viktor Ružić, the mayor Teodor Peičić and the diplomatic corps, the consuls of the represented countries.

Art historian and art critic Zdenka Munk⁴⁵ (ZEM) in several articles in the daily newspaper Novosti brings forth a detailed analysis of national presentations and each text was devoted to one nation. She pointed out and detected two major influences in works of Czech artists – the older generation was under the influence of “Munich’s Impressionism” and Post-Impressionism and the youngest generation, influenced by Paris, was marked with styles following Post-Impressionism. “With two or three exceptions, they capture the surface of their role models, acquired in Paris. [...] The technique is more or less virtuously acquired, but behind it one does see the problem of expression which is not experienced and felt – from its theoretical inception.”⁴⁶ As the most significant artists, she points out Julia Mezerova and Vilma Vrbova. The Croatian audience was particularly interested in the fact that Ivanka Bukovac (1899-1978), the daughter of the famous Croatian painter Vlaho Bukovac, exhibited her works in the Czech section of the exhibition: “[...] whereas Bukovac Ivanka (daughter of the painter Vlaho Bukovac) reveals in the solid ‘Head of the Girl,’ her father and sole teacher.”⁴⁷ In addition, the largest number of sculptors was in the Czech section, and Munk especially pointed out the architectural section in which two architects (Muller and Pavlikova) exhibited, “[...] showing the successes of Czechoslovak women in the field of cultural work,” adding that: “The time passed when the question of women’s technical ability was put in question at all; today they are asked for something more – yes, mentally free from all prejudice and every hesitation, to express themselves fully.”⁴⁸

For Romanian artists, she emphasizes the absence of a great tradition in Romanian art in general due to the long Turkish rule, which meant that until the 19th century in Romania “byzanticism” prevailed. New art had come to Romania with the 19th-century influences brought by young artists from centres such as Vienna, Munich or Paris. As opposed to the art of other nations, Romanian art was represented only by the first and the youngest generations of women artists. Amongst the artists she distinguished Celine Emilian, sculptor and pupil of Antoine Bourdelle, and her portrayal of Alfred Corot. The last review was devoted to Serbian and Slovenian artists. For Serbian artists, Munk emphasized the stronger influence of Paris and the “modern pictorial lines,”⁴⁹ beginning with Nadežda Petrović, with whom Serbian modernity began. “Slovene artists show that their works generally present with a closed conservatism without free formal experiments.”⁵⁰

Zdenka Munk pointed out that in the works of Slovenian artists academic realism dominated along with German Impressionism, and she also noted the late influence of Impressionism by the Slovenian painter Matija Jama. In the Yugoslav section, works by seven architects were exhibited, including projects for private residential buildings, as well as public ones (stock exchange, schools, etc.).

⁴⁷ Ibid.
⁴⁸ Ibid.
⁵⁰ Ibid.
All the exhibitions of the Little Entente of Women were of a commercial character, and a large number of art works were purchased in Belgrade, mostly by state and city structures from Queen Maria, the Prime Minister, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, to banks and others. In Zagreb, from this exhibition for the holdings of the Modern Gallery, by the decision of Ban Ružić, six paintings were purchased. The works of four Croatian artists, members of the Women’s Art Club, Anka Bestal, Cata Dujšin, Zenaide Bandur and Lina Crnčić-Virant, were acquired along with one by Romanian and one by a Czech artist – Vilma Vrbova’s oil on canvas Lida (Fig. 6). The average price of a painting was about 3,000 dinars, which is significantly less than the prices works from this exhibition had in Belgrade, where some were sold for as much as 10,000 dinars – the amount the National Bank paid for the painting of Romanian artist Laeticia Lukasievitz.

Retrospective exhibition of women painters 1800-1914

Along with the exhibition of the Little Entente of Women, two art historians Roksana Cuvaj Zurunić and Verena Manč also produced a kind of a small retrospective of Croatian women painters covering the period from 1800 to 1914. Roksana Cuvaj Zurunić, as a member of the Women’s Art Club, a well educated painter and art historian, had good qualifications for this task, together with Verena Manč, also an art historian and at that time a journalist, who was her assistant for the exhibition.

The exhibition was held alongside the main exhibition of the Little Entente of Women in the Art Pavilion and despite its grand title, the whole impression of the exhibition was rather modest. It presented works by seven painters featuring eighteen paintings: from the oldest artist dating from the beginning of the 19th century, Marija Strümer Bedeković through the well-known Croatian water-colourist Slava Raškaj to contemporary artists, such as the youngest among them Nasta Rojc.

The reception of this exhibition can be best observed in the article published in Novosti: Zem. in Novosti: [...] on the basis of these eighteen exhibited paintings, we can speak – in part – about the sad fact that, since the time of our first noble women painters and almost to our day, among all those names we cannot find such strong individualities that would express something grand in art or deconstruct something and even build something new. [...] but it is also clear to us that almost all of these painters are only good students of their teachers, whose creative intensity is also often questioned, or pupils of foreign schools (Venetian, Viennese and Munich) who, viewed from the perspective of the great European painting, in which Impressionism was born, they are only equals second-rate design. Throughout the period covered by the exhibition, the themes do not change: portraits, still lifes and landscapes dominate and “persistently remain within the limits of academic realism.”

Roksana Zurunić Cuvaj wrote about the artistic efforts of women artists from the 19th century to then present day in her review entitled Žena na polju likovne umjetnosti u Hrvatskoj (Woman in the Field of Fine Art in Croatia), dedicated to Croatian women artists. As mentioned, she was one of the authors of the retrospective exhibition of Croatian women artists. Her view of the artistic endeavours of artists in the 19th century was very critical, stating that “it was not about shaping original ideas,” noting that the earliest style of a few noblewomen was painting “without the inner urge”, only with the desire to appeal to a certain

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11 Verena Manč married name Han (1912-1993) art historian, graduated from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Zagreb where she also received her doctorate. From 1936 to 1941 she worked as an art critic in the Ožbaj newspaper. She was a curator in the Museum of Arts and Crafts and the Modern Gallery. In 1947 she went to Belgrade where she worked in the Federal Peoples’ Republic of Yugoslavia Science and Culture Committee. – V.Fo. (Vilija Fligo), Han, Verena in: Hrvatski biografski leksikon 5-6, 621-622
12 Marija Strümer Bedeković Croatian painter from the first half of the 19th century
13 Slava Raškaj (1877-1906) Croatian painter, educated in Vienna and Zagreb; she studied painting privately with Croatian painter Bela Csikos Sesia. In Croatian art history she is remembered as one of the greatest watercolourists.
15 Ibid.
Figure 6. Vilma Vrhova, Lidia, 1936, oil on canvas, Modern Gallery Zagreb - MG-1229. Photograph by Goran Vranić, Modern Gallery, Zagreb.
social strata. She characterized their creativity as part of education and pastime.

However, she proactively summarizes the necessary steps that could help the contemporary artistic emancipation of women in order to put forth more quality works in the field of art:

In order to place women’s artistic work in Croatia on a solid basis, from which it could really be on the original and particular way of progress, what would be needed is following: – adequate economic support for women in general – emphasis on the need for women’s art works – enabling women’s artistic studies with scholarships, which would be awarded through competitions – participation of women artists in public art works.

**Conclusion**

The 1920s and 1930s were a time of strengthening for the feminist movement and of the founding of numerous women’s associations and alliances that actively worked on solving the issue of gender equality. The Zagreb Women’s Art Club played an important role in the emancipation of women artists – especially by organizing the first women group exhibitions. In addition, the Women’s Art Club also organized solo exhibitions of foreign women artists, which was one of the goals of the Club itself, and among which the solo exhibition of Käthe Kollwitz in the Art Pavilion in 1936 was certainly the most important.

By joining and cooperating with various women’s professional organizations, such as the cooperation between Women’s Art Club and the Association of University Educated Women, the first women’s travelling exhibition was organized. The geopolitical joining of national women’s organizations into the Little Entente of Women brought about great international exhibition projects of travelling exhibitions by the Little Entente of Women. All these projects contributed to greater visibility and perception of women’s artistic activities. The last Women’s Art Club exhibition was held in Osijek in 1940. During the Second World War the Club operated with difficulties, and as we find out from the memo written by its former President Lina Crnčić-Virant to the Association of Artists of Croatia in 1947, after the war it ceased its work completely, because all its members became members of the Association of Artists of Croatia, and they deemed the continuation of Club’s existence unnecessary in 1946.

Collective women’s art exhibitions did not appear again in Zagreb until the 1960s. Since 1964, women’s exhibitions on the occasion of March 8th were mostly organized on the initiative of local municipal cultural institutions (Centre for aesthetic education Trešnjevka, Vladimir Nazor Library etc.). Since 1967, such commemorative exhibitions for Women’s Day were also organized by ULUH (Croatian Association of Artists). Women artists regularly exhibited at ULUH annual exhibitions together with male colleagues.

We can conclude that women’s only exhibitions at that point moved from main exhibition venues to the margins and into venues of local communities or municipalities. The new Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and the new political system brought declarative equality, thus it was considered that women’s production no longer needed to be exhibited separately in the central city exhibition venues separate from the male ones, as was the case during the 1920s and 1930s and during the time of active struggle for gender equality.

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**Biographies**

Darija Alujević is a Senior Associate at the Fine Arts Archives of the Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts in Zagreb. She graduated with a degree in Art History and Italian language and literature from the

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57 Ibid.
58 In the 1938 the Club organized the exhibition of Austrian painter Trude Waehner-Schmidt, as well as a solo exhibition of Nasta Rojc. Both were held in the Art Pavilion.  
59 http://dizhi.haru.hr/object/view/2746; Loveorka Magaš, “Značenje i recepcija zagrebačke izložbe Käthe Kollwitz” (The Significance of the Exhibition of Käthe Kollwitz in Zagreb), Zbornik 3. kongresa hrvatskih povjesničara umjetnosti (Zagreb, Institut za povijest umjetnosti, 2013) 277-284.  
50 Croatian State Archives (HDA), HDLU fond 1979-2, box 57.
University of Zagreb where she is currently preparing a dissertation on Croatian sculptress Miša Wod (Ludmila Wodsedalek) (1888-1968). Her primarily field of interest is Croatian and European art of the first half of the 20th century, particularly sculpture and female artists. She is a member of the team at the research project *Manifestations of Modern Sculpture in Croatia: Sculpture on the Crossroads between Socio-political Pragmatism, Economic Possibilities and Aesthetical Contemplation* financed by the Croatian Science Foundation. She has been the author and/or collaborator in a variety of exhibition projects including: *Allegory and Arcadia: Motifs from Antiquity in the Art of Croatian Modernism* (2013), Klovićevi dvori Gallery, Zagreb; *The Challenge of Modernism. Vienna and Zagreb around 1900*, Belvedere, Vienna (2017), etc.

Dunja Nekić is the Head of the Collection of Old Photography in the Museum of Arts and Crafts. She studied Art History and English Language and Literature at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Zagreb. Since 2010 she has been enrolled in postgraduate studies with a thesis on the *Women’s Art Club (Klub likovnih umjetnica)* which existed in the interwar period in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. Her primary interest is in the reception of women artists and photographers since the interwar period. Along with research and curatorial work in photography, she also worked on several EU projects relating to digitisation of cultural heritage.