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Imagem: Midsummer Night, wood-cut in colour, 1954. (Pokrajinski muzej Ptuj-Ormož, photo Boris Farič). Detalhe.

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Abstract

The paper deals with the question of modernism in the post WW II period when the new political situation in Eastern Europe brought significant changes in art. The case of the Slovene painter France Mihelič (1907–1998) illustrates how important personal experience was in the transformation from realism to modernism as well as how crucial it was for a talented artist to be acquainted with contemporary trends in the main Western European art centres. After WW II, most Slovene artists travelled to Paris in order to advance creatively, yet France Mihelič's stay in the French city (1950) stands out. Mihelič is an acknowledged representative of fantastic art who reached his artistic peak in the 1950s when he exhibited and received awards at key art events in Europe and South America.

Key words

France Mihelič ; Slovenia; Yugoslavia; Venice Biennale ; IV Biennial São Paulo; *kurent*; fantastic art.

Resumo

O artigo aborda a questão do modernismo no período pós-Segunda Guerra Mundial quando a nova situação política na Europa Oriental engendrou mudanças significativas na arte. O caso do pintor esloveno France Mihelič (1907-1998) ilustra como a experiência pessoal era importante na transformação do realismo para o modernismo, bem como, para um artista talentoso, o quão crucial era conhecer as tendências contemporâneas nos principais centros de arte da Europa Ocidental. Após a Segunda Guerra Mundial, a maioria dos artistas eslovenos viajou para Paris para desenvolver-se no campo artístico, mas a permanência de France Mihelič na cidade francesa (1950) se destaca. Mihelič é um representante reconhecido de arte fantástica, tendo atingido seu ápice artístico na década de 1950, quando exibiu e recebeu prêmios em eventos-chave da Europa e da América do Sul.

Palavras chave

France Mihelič; Eslovênia; Iugoslávia; Bienal de Veneza; IV Bienal de São Paulo; *kurent*; arte fantástica.

WW II not only cut brutally into everyday life but also brought about a noticeable and significant change of direction in European art. Post-WW II, the political regime in Eastern European countries did not allow regular contact with the main Western European art centres and the increasingly important New York scene. However, we should resist the temptation to generalize and simplify the Eastern European situation. Socialist realism has been a popular research topic over the last few decades, yet it is not an entirely homogenous or unified genre. In ex-Yugoslavia, Josip Broz Tito's break with Stalin in 1948 had a huge impact on the region's political and social circumstances. In the geographical and political sense, Yugoslavia (composed of six republics, Slovenia in the North being one of them) was situated between the East and West; a position of huge importance at the peak of the cold war. The legendary leader Tito and his adherents tried to convince the world with an image of Yugoslavia as a modern society based on a non-capitalist political system. "Socialism with a human face" was the motto often used to promote the unique Yugoslav political state of affairs, embodied in the invention of a particular political approach, often called the "Yugoslav third way" (Zimmermann, 2010; Zimmermann, 2012). As far as art was concerned, the authorities hoped to present Yugoslavia as a country of outstanding medieval heritage sitting alongside contemporary art of the highest quality. There were a number of exciting Yugoslav presentations at Expo exhibitions with bold architectural projects for pavilions as well as representative art exhibitions in foreign galleries and museums (Zimmermann 2010; Bjažić Klarin, Galijer, 2013).

However, while Yugoslav state borders were strongly controlled, travel abroad was possible. Artists were eligible for grants named after Moše Pijade (1890–1957), one of the leading communists from the 1920s and a close collaborator of Josip Broz Tito (1892–1980). Pijade, a leading political figure until 1955, was a painter himself and knew from his own experience how important it was for an artist to be acquainted with artistic novelties. It was his idea to enable artists to visit Western European centres;¹ there were a large number of grants approved until the 1980s when the collapse of Yugoslavia was already underway and the general circumstances in the region changed radically. Although the grants were modest, artists could stay in foreign countries for several months, some even for a whole year. Most of the artists who obtained Moše Pijade grants decided to visit Paris. After WW II, the glamour of Paris as a global art capital had faded, yet its pre-war fame was still alluring. Yet, this was not the only reason for choosing Paris. The Slovene painter Veno Pilon (1896–1970) took up residence in Paris in 1928 and was known to be willing to help any Slovene artist in need of accommodation and funds.

Paris was of crucial importance for Slovene painters and sculptors in the post-war decades. Jure Mikuž was the first to study this phenomenon in depth², pinpointing how significantly some exhibitions and French artists influenced their Slovene counterparts (Mikuž, 1995). A stay in Paris often brought a change of direction, marked by a determined shift from realism to modernism in the oeuvre of many Slovene artists. Mikuž also discussed the circumstances in Slovene art after WW II and was most critical toward Slovene art historians who were (un)able to analyse the production in Slovenia, comparing it with the general European situation. He was at pains to point out that being stimulated by the artistic experience in Paris - not imitating it - was also productive. Jure Mikuž's study, in fact his doctoral thesis (1983), caused upset in artistic circles. They rejected Jure Mikuž's methodology and conclusions, dismissing direct comparisons with French painters. It is no coincidence that a monograph on the topic was not published until 1995. However, the Paris influence was not the only trigger in the transformation from realism to more or less extreme modernism in the oeuvre of

successful Slovene artists, and the other possible influences should also be considered. Beside foreign models, local phenomena as well as personal events and memories were hugely important, and the oeuvre of the Slovene painter France Mihelič (1907–1998) presents a rather special example of this.³

The Slovene painter France Mihelič (1907–1998)

France Mihelič, who is usually described as a representative of fantastic art, was born into an extremely modest family and studied in Zagreb in Croatia (1927–1931),⁴ where on the one hand he followed a relatively traditional study path, and on the other he became acquainted with the group of artists known as *Zemlja* (Soil). *Zemlja* was a typical pre-war artistic movement reflecting the 1930s economic crisis and connected to Zagreb's rural surroundings, which were extremely poor and contrasted starkly with the cosmopolitan nature of the city. Krsto Hegedušić (1901–1975), the leader of the group, was born in the village Hlebine not far from Zagreb and remained in regular contact with the Hlebine residents, many of whom practised traditional painting on glass. The Hlebine folk paintings with their simplified forms and flat colour surfaces were a significant inspiration for him, while he took on the role of teacher for talented local painters who had no opportunity to study.⁵ Another of Hegedušić's models was Peter Brueghel the Elder, who acquired the name Peasant Breughel for his depictions of rural themes. It was Krsto Hegedušić who provided the main inspiration for France Mihelič's painting immediately after completing his studies at Zagreb academy in 1931. Mihelič was interested in rural motives and in members of the lower social classes. His first job as a teacher in Kruševac in Serbia (1934–1936) offered him picturesque scenery, although he longed to return to his homeland, Slovenia.



Figs.1 e 2. The Beggar from Ptuj, charcoal, 1938 (Pokrajinski muzej Ptuj-Ormož, photo Boris Farič)
Children from Haloze, drawing in ink, 1938
(Pokrajinski muzej Ptuj-Ormož, photo Boris Farič)

In 1936 Mihelič was employed as a drawing teacher at Ptuj high school in the Styrian region of Slovenia. Ptuj has an especially rich Antique and Medieval history, but Mihelič was less impressed with the historical flavour of the old town and more interested in Ptuj's rural surroundings. The carnival masks, the so-called *kurent* in particular, fascinated him. The main mission of the *kurent*, the fur-clad men in terrifying masks who jump to ring the huge bells attached to their waists, is to drive the winter out and usher in spring – or in other words – the *kurent* brings new life.



Figs.3 e 4. Kurents on the Ptuj streets during Carnival. Fonte: fotografias da autora.

This attractive folk phenomenon has a long tradition, most probably rooted in the pagan ceremonies of the goddess Kybela.⁶ *Kurent* became the main motif of Mihelič's oeuvre. It was not only their appearance and mysterious mission that intrigued him, he had his own experience of the *kurent* which touched him deeply. During the 1937 carnival, Mihelič was staying in the village of Dornava near Ptuj to take some photos and draw; while in a village inn he heard that there was a dead *kurent* lying in the fields. He hurried out to see the unbelievable sight. A group of masks stood astonished around the corpse. The dreadful memory haunted Mihelič for the rest of his life. The *kurent*, who should have brought new life, was dead – what a contradiction! Mihelič painted many versions of the dead carnival

mask. He needed a year to complete the first version of it, which was very successfully exhibited and critically received in 1939 (Ciglencčki, 1994). Perhaps the most convincing of the woodcuts is the 1955 version in colour, which was widely published and exhibited and was also part of Mihelič's exhibition at the IV São Paulo Biennial in 1957.



Fig.5. The Dead Kurent, wood-cut in colour, 1955. (Pokrajinski muzej Ptuj-Ormož, photo Boris Farič)

The horror Mihelič experienced in the winter landscape of Dornava in 1937 changed the symbolism of the carnival mask in the painter's mind radically. In spite of its terrifying appearance, the *kurent* is the traditional carrier of new life; for Mihelič the *kurent* changed into a harbinger of death, a demon – reflected in the development of the motif in Mihelič's oeuvre (Ciglencčki 2015). His first oil painting (from 1938) was interpreted as an announcement of the war, with the artist himself naming it a "historical painting". The painter succeeded in both maintaining the link with the emotionally charged event from 1937 and generalizing the symbolic meaning of the story by interpreting it in a refined artistic language. His image won over the wider public, although few of them would have been familiar with the local tradition of carnival masks in the Ptuj area. The 1955 wood-cut in colour was exhibited regularly in Slovenia and Yugoslavia but also abroad, and always successfully.

WW II brought radical changes. France Mihelič left Ptuj immediately after the outbreak of war and lived for a while in Ljubljana, joining the organized resistance in autumn 1943. He was a member of the

group of artists responsible for Liberation Front propaganda and worked in graphics for the Slovene Communist Party. Mihelič often declared his war works to be documentary, although he usually added that such documents demand further treatment in order to render their content more deeply symbolic – to this end he explained his method of dealing with his war material (Novak, 1955). There are photos preserved presenting Mihelič drawing various war scenes. It was the consequences of battles that mostly interested him: houses on fire or ruined by bombing, dead horses, trees damaged by shooting; for him the destroyed tree stood as a symbol of a dying human being. Mihelič's propaganda work, in the form of sharp-humoured caricature, provided another creative outlet during the war. Mihelič also managed to incorporate surrealist elements in realistic compositions. Anything could appear: female nudes, *kurents*, thrilling scenes with couples making love in the middle of the ruins, and sometimes even humorous scenes, taken from the depositary of folk legends. Realistic drawings were a tool to maintain memories of an abstract nature. He explained that emotionally intense war memories influenced his work enormously (Zlobec, 1955). One of Mihelič's strongest impressions was formed during a long night walk. A group of partisans had stopped at the edge of a village; the dogs felt their presence and began to howl - an unforgettable sound in the darkness - which Mihelič later expressed in the motif of Hymeres (Novak, 1955). In fact, as a child Mihelič was already fascinated by various creatures and vegetable forms; he was intrigued, if not a little frightened by the creatures he saw while walking through the countryside, and his imagination followed unusual shapes.



Fig.6. Burned Must Pear, charcoal, 1945 (Pokrajinski muzej Ptuj-Ormož, photo Boris Farič).

In 1945 the Academy of Art was established in Ljubljana, the Slovene capital, and France Mihelič was immediately engaged as a professor. He gained a reputation as a very strict teacher who insisted that drawing is the basis of any artwork. One of his principles was that while drawing the observed forms should be simplified in a cubistic sense. Although Mihelič retired in 1970, until his death in 1998 (and still now) Mihelič was regarded as a respected artist with an impressive oeuvre. His late phase is also worthy of attention. The peak of his artistic legacy is undoubtedly the woodcuts and etchings originating from 1953 until 1959, which were awarded numerous prizes. France Mihelič's meteoric rise to success in the 1950s was most definitely connected to his stay in Paris in 1950.

France Mihelič in Paris (1950)

Staying in Paris for seven months in 1950 was an extremely significant experience for the painter. It was not his first trip abroad; he had briefly visited Paris in 1937 and 1939. In 1938 he visited the Venice Biennial, which greatly impressed him, writing a short report on it for the main Slovene newspaper (Mihelič, 1939: 7). However, in general, the exhibitions in the pavilions left him mostly cold. He was particularly unhappy with the presentation in the Yugoslav pavilion; he was upset by the German attitude towards *entartete Kunst* and judged the presentation of the Italian futurists as jarring. The main exhibition in the Central Pavilion in *Giardini* presenting 19th century landscape painting fascinated him. It was Camille Corot who impressed him most. Over the next few years, Mihelič featured trees, which produce a vertiginous effect in the viewer, as though one were staring from the ground to the branches and leaves above. He did not directly follow the great master's landscape painting (the closest he comes to Corot is the silvery glittering effect of the light), but Corot influenced him to intensify his observation of the surroundings of Šturmovci village, an area prone to flooding not far from Ptuj where a special sort of poplar (called silver poplar) grows. Mihelič's response to the Venice Biennial was traditional but obviously typical; his reaction to Paris in 1950 was similar. He reported in his letters that he was visiting exhibitions regularly in Paris and familiarising himself with abstract and surrealist painting. He rejected abstract painting, however, explaining that he felt the need for objects to convey a sense of weight and dimension. He was closer to surrealism, but felt no need to comment upon it, or indeed engage with it in his own work (Gostiša 1999: 332–333).

Jure Mikuž researched France Mihelič's oeuvre for several years and was also interested in his Paris experiences, devoting a chapter in his monograph to France Mihelič (Mikuž, 1995: 174–201). Mikuž exposes Mihelič's very personal relation to the motives in his painting, primarily his close connections with nature. According to Mikuž, the seven months in Paris did not bring about immediate changes in Mihelič's oeuvre. He rates two series of Mihelič's Paris drawings as significant: the nudes, which were mostly reflected later in the compositions with Daphne, and the animals, which contributed to the fantastic motives. Mikuž believes that the main inspiration for Mihelič's shift to fantastic art was not connected with Paris but with the Venice Biennial in 1954, where Mihelič also exhibited. The whole Biennial was dedicated to surrealism. Max Ernst, Jean Arp and Joan Miró received the main awards and the central exhibition was titled *Between Fantastic and Abstract Art*. Victor Brauner, Jean Carzou, Lucien Coutaud, Edouard Goerg, Felix Labisse and André Masson exhibited in the French pavilion. Jure Mikuž suggests that the vegetation and eroticism in the works of Lucien Coutaud particularly inspired Mihelič.⁷ He refers to Špelca Čopič's statement that Mihelič only entered fantastic art in 1954 (Čopič, 1966: 184). We would like to prove that Mikuž reached this conclusion rather hastily. It is true

that Mihelič exhibited his fantastic compositions no earlier than 1954; however, the earliest of the fantastic woodcuts and etchings are dated to 1953, before the Venice Biennial and the probable encounter with the surrealist exposition in the French pavilion. In fact, Mihelič received prizes in Venice for his fantastic prints only, as they fitted the themes of the Venice Biennial perfectly. Mihelič rejected Mikuž's conclusions, who answered with a quotation from the *Quadrum* review from 1957, in which the French critic Jean Bouret reported from the Ljubljana Biennial of Graphic Art, publishing Mihelič's woodcut *Visit* (1957) and establishing that Mihelič imitated Lucien Coutaud's surrealism (Mikuž, 1995: 176; Bouret 1957). As regards fantastic art after WW II, Mikuž exposes the individualism of the leading figures of the genre, typical also for Mihelič, and concludes his interpretation with the statement that Mihelič is on a par with the most outstanding European fantastic artists of the post-WW II period⁸.

France Mihelič rejected the notion that he followed Lucien Coutaud. The superficial formal similarities between their work can also be explained as characteristic of fantastic art in general. However, France Mihelič's stay in Paris should be more thoroughly analysed, and the drawings from his legacy, preserved in the Regional Museum Ptuj from 2000, would be of great help.⁹ There are also some other documents concerning Mihelič's Parisian experience; studying them carefully we can see that Mihelič's stay in Paris was a very strictly planned project. Mihelič had already left youth behind – in 1950 he was already 43, a formed and acknowledged painter with recognisable motives and a treasury of emotionally impressive memories. He obviously knew that he had little time to improve his skills and knowledge. The Moše Pijade grant offered him the opportunity to stay abroad for more than six months for the first time and he drew up a detailed plan to make the most of it.



Figs.7 e 8. Two nudes, charcoal, 1950 (Pokrajinski muzej Ptuj-Ormož, photo Boris Farič)

In Paris Mihelič was in close contact with Veno Pilon, meeting regularly with him at Montparnasse. France Mihelič was also in regular contact with Mira Puc, a writer and his later wife, and he also remained in contact with Veno Pilon years after his stay in Paris. In richly illustrated letters to Mira Puc, Mihelič described his Paris adventures with humour and sometimes even with sarcasm – such was his style. The legacy of his visit to Paris includes some oil paintings and a huge number of drawings. Two self-portraits (1950) in a realistic style stand out among the oil paintings; the complex spatial composition, with two mirrors reflecting the figure of the painter and a crammed temporary living place can be compared with similar compositions from the history of art. France Mihelič saw his stay in Paris as a period for deep and disciplined study and obviously did not allow himself to experiment.¹⁰



Figs.9 e 10. Eagles and a Camel, charcoal, 1950 (Pokrajinski muzej Ptuj-Ormož, photo Boris Farič)

The numerous drawings are even more characteristic of his work. We can divide them into four main groups. One of the groups is an extensive body of female nudes, the second consists of drawings of animals from the zoo, the third group is drawings of artefacts from the *Musée de l'Homme* and the fourth is a group with sketches from coffeehouses. During his stay, France Mihelič decided to inscribe into the *Académie de la Grande Chaumière*; day after day he, himself a professor, drew nudes in a mixed class of students, young and old, skilled and beginners. He had already completed similar studies, during which he earned much needed funds by drawing various medical curiosities for the hospital, including dead babies and foetus. Mihelič drew very well as a student. One of his Zagreb professors, Maksimilijan Vanka (1889–1963), declared: “When Mihelič draws it is like he is praying,” (Gostiša, 1997: 16). In Paris he tried to make good use of the models at his disposal; he observed them from various angles and depicted them with strong outlines. The nudes, and the animals which he drew in the Paris zoo, express his struggle to improve his basic skills. The drawings he produced in

the *Musée de l'Homme* are especially interesting. There are not many of them, but they present the only evidence that while in Paris he was interested in the primitive art which was so crucial for the pioneers of modernism. In Paris Mihelič also drew while strolling around and spending his time in coffeehouses with Veno Pilon and other friends. These drawings are of a totally different kind. Mihelič drew quickly and spontaneously. It is significant that the connoisseurs of Mihelič's oeuvre prefer these sketches to others from his extensive Paris material. The sketches are interesting in many ways: Mihelič conjured up the typical humour and bohemian spirit of Parisian 1950s coffeehouses through his convincing ink. Portraits of Veno Pilon, of numerous strangers and even of the famous Kiki de Montparnasse (1901–1953), a faded beauty, have all survived.



Fig.11. Drawing from Musée de l'Homme, charcoal, 1950. (Pokrajinski muzej Ptuj-Ormož, photo Boris Farič)

Did any of the first three mentioned interests (nudes, anatomy of animals, primitive art) particularly influence Mihelič's later oeuvre? A sensuous female nude with a slightly rounded figure was an important element of his compositions; she appears as dream-like or as an unfulfilled wish, very often as a Daphne. Animals also appear in his compositions, although it is hard to connect them directly with the drawings from the Paris zoo. The animals later depicted by Mihelič, also prevailing motives in his fantastic composition, are mostly linked to his war experiences. Terrifying wolves or fantastic flying beings are symbols of horror and evil. The figures inspired by old Indian culture are unrecognisable in Mihelič's art. Did he draw them in vain? Surely not, as we can imagine that he was trying to capture something of a foreign and distant culture in his depiction of them. Yet, in some way, they perhaps remind him of a *kurent*, surely the strongest motif in his painting, unparalleled by other, similar images

rooted in the tradition of ancient civilisations. Mihelič never travelled over the ocean and had no other opportunity to become familiar with North and South-American civilizations. His daughter Alenka Puhar remembers that he was fascinated by old Indian cultures, especially the grim details of deaths and various atrocities. While he possessed some books on these civilizations and a friend brought him an exhibition catalogue from Paris about old Mexican cultures as a present, these interests remained mostly superficial, unsupported by extensive study or a personal experience.¹¹ The possibility to draw in the *Musée de l'Homme* was unique. There were no collections of relicts of foreign civilizations, like Japanese woodcuts or African ritual masks,¹² in Slovenia before the end of the 1960s.¹³ Slovene painters in general had no opportunity to be influenced by the fascinating heritage of distant cultures as was the case in France and other countries where the upper class could travel around the world and collect impressive objects. Slovene painters and sculptors had to find other ways to approach the origins of modern art. They searched mostly in folk heritage; Mihelič's *kurent* is regarded as one of the best examples of how strong this type of impulse can be. The distant admiration of exotic cultures was certainly important, yet we should see it as a desire to strengthen the painter's attachment to similar motives of his own.

Another experience Mihelič most likely had in Paris – and which is generally overlooked – was that he was probably able to see Victor Hugo's drawings. There is only one relict in his legacy, a torn-out newspaper article, presenting Hugo's (1802–1885) drawing oeuvre.¹⁴ Mihelič never mentioned Hugo in his correspondence or in conversations with friends and gallery curators, although it is also true that Mihelič did not speak much about his creative process and influences in general. He was willing to speak about the adventures, and sometimes the emotions, which were crucial for his work. He often described encountering the dead *kurent* in 1937, or he remembered some events from his childhood. He remained mysterious on the question of what influenced his career; however, art historians have been able to piece together the answers to some of these questions or at least suggest reasonable answers to them. One of them is a reproduction of a painting by Hans Baldung Grien titled *Death and the Maiden* (1518–20, Kunstsammlung Basel). A modest sheet of paper fastened on his studio wall indicated Mihelič's respect towards the great old master and the motif of Vanitas as well as his attitude to and also fear of death in general. He never followed Baldung Grien's painting directly, but in many of his works we can recognize a similar view of human fate – a skeleton grasping a beautiful and sensuous young woman is a common motif in Mihelič's compositions. We can try to interpret Mihelič's attitude to Victor Hugo's drawings in the same way. There was no need for him to follow Hugo's drawing style, however, it is significant how radically Mihelič untethered his imagination soon after 1950. Fantastic elements had already appeared in his early works, but the various beings incorporated into realistically composed scenes are still linked to a recognizable world: childhood memories, images of the dead *kurent*, terrifying dogs/wolves from wartime, some interesting folk tradition scenes, etc. The drawings and engraving plates Mihelič produced post-1950 reflect his unstoppable imagination. Victor Hugo was much respected for his drawing while alive, but only among a narrow circle of friends and art connoisseurs; soon after his death his fame escalated. Artists admired his spontaneous style and his works were interpreted as forerunners of modern art. Hugo himself reported that some of his drawings were realised in an almost semi-conscious state; he practised spiritual séances and was able to use random spots or similar marks on the surface of the paper as a starting-point for the composition in ink. He even mixed various liquids with ink, coffee for instance, or dust to achieve special effects. Pierre

Georgel warns against interpreting Victor Hugo's drawings as entirely unique in the 19th century and draws attention to a number of Romantic painters who were using similar methods to achieve modernist effects; popular and mass production was also a source of inspiration (Corneille, Herscher, 1964: 29; Georgel, 1974: s. p.; Stolpe, 2012: 414). What makes Victor Hugo's drawings so unique in 19th century French art production is the fact that the famous writer practised drawing as an intimate occupation, which is reflected throughout his entire drawing oeuvre. He donated some of his drawings to close friends, but never put them on display except at home. Drawing gave Hugo the opportunity to express himself completely freely, with no obstacles such as public opinion or doubts about his lack of academic training. During his stay in Paris, France Mihelič had an opportunity to visit Victor Hugo's residence at Place des Vosges which was opened to the public in 1903. Hugo's drawings are still part of the furnishings.

In 1963 Mihelič initiated a monograph entitled simply *France Mihelič, Drawings*. France Stele (1886–1972), an acknowledged art historian, produced a study of Mihelič's drawing oeuvre from 1934 until 1960, with Mihelič himself selecting the works. Stele's text is accompanied by 24 drawings in a fantastic style from around 1960. Of 87 full-page reproductions, there are 52 drawings from Paris. Stele understood the Paris drawings as proof of the painter's struggle to achieve a documentary style and recognised Mihelič's exceptional skill. The nudes and animal drawings were of special interest to Stele, while the coffeehouse sketches did not impress him (Stele, 1963: 15); he did not mention the drawings from *Musée de l'Homme*, although one of them was published. Stele saw the drawings from Paris as a means which enabled Mihelič to explore a fantastic style with no technical obstacles. It is significant that Mihelič himself was obviously aware of the importance of his Paris period. He brought a huge amount of drawings from Paris back home, where he decided to publish a selection of them and preserved them in his studio until his death. On the other hand, art historians, with the exception of France Stele, paid little attention to his Paris drawings. In Lojze Gostiša's trilogy, which analyses Mihelič's oeuvre in details, the Paris period is discussed in less than a page (Gostiša, 1999: 12), mentioning only Mihelič's self-portrait in oil and the coffeehouse sketches. However, we remain convinced that it was in Paris that Mihelič built a firm foundation for his rapid development in the fantastic world over the following few years.

France Mihelič in 1950s

In 1952 and 1953 Mihelič continued to paint in oil in a manner similar to the style he practised in 1946–1950. It is obvious that he tried to diminish spatial depth and involve some other modernist elements. However, a more radical change was still to occur, and in 1953 he gave up painting for seven years to devote himself entirely to graphics and drawings. In those seven years of strictly focused work, Mihelič developed his characteristic style, recognized to be an important part of European fantastic painting (Brion, 1961: 20). In the 1950s and 1960s he received his main awards for graphics. In 1965 he became a member of The Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts as well as of the *Accademia Fiorentina delle Arti del Disegno*. It is difficult to keep track of all the awards he was given in Slovenia and Yugoslavia, although three of them perhaps stand out: in 1955 he was awarded the highest prize in Slovenia for culture – for his graphic work – while in 1955 and in 1959 he received an award at the Ljubljana Biennial of Graphic Arts. The Biennial of Graphic Arts in Ljubljana has taken place regularly since 1955 and is a globally respected event (<http://www.mglc->

lj.si/eng/the_biennial/about_the_biennial). It was no coincidence that a selection of the representatives of *École de Paris* was exhibited at the first Biennial.¹⁵

For the purposes of our paper, it is interesting to draw attention to the exhibitions and awards that Mihelič achieved abroad. The socialist post-war regime supported Mihelič's work, and he was able to exhibit and have exhibition catalogues and monographs about his oeuvre printed during his lifetime. Mihelič was almost always involved in exhibitions which were organized to present Slovene and/or Yugoslav art abroad. As already mentioned, he exhibited at the Venice Biennale in 1954, winning the Renato Carrain award.



Fig.12. Dancing Kurents, linocut, 1953 (Pokrajinski muzej Ptuj-Ormož, photo Boris Farič)

In 1953 an exhibition entitled *100 Prints of Yugoslav Graphic* began a tour through Brazil (São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Belo Horizonte), followed by presentations in Argentina. France Mihelič took part in the exhibition and some of his prints were bought by an unnamed gallery in Rio de Janeiro.¹⁶ In 1954 he began a USA tour of four artists from Yugoslavia: Krsto Hegedušić (1901–1975), Milan Konjević (1898–1993), Nikola Martinovski (1903–1973) and France Mihelič. They presented in Washington and in Whyte's Gallery in New York (in 1955) to favourable reviews.

In 1955 a solo exhibition with 44 of France Mihelič's graphics was organized in the Yugoslav Gallery in Paris. It was proclaimed a great success, with many Parisian newspapers reporting on it and highlighting Mihelič's "sense for creating a synthesis between real and surreal, between poetical, sensuality and quotidian" (Bouret, 1955).¹⁷ There were comparisons with Dali, too, while Agnes Humbert (1894–1963), a respected art historian engaged in *Musée national des Arts et de Traditions Populaires* in *Palais de Chaillot*, expressed her admiration with an inscription into the visitors' book.

She explained that after spending time in Paris many foreign painters organized an exhibition and showed at the *École de Paris*, yet according to her, Mihelič's art was entirely autochthonous.



Fig.13. Midsummer Night, wood-cut in colour, 1954. (Pokrajinski muzej Ptuj-Ormož, photo Boris Farič)

In 1956 Mihelič exhibited at the Xylon international woodcut exhibition in Zürich. The London art magazine *The Studio* put a reproduction of his coloured woodcut, *The Dead Kurent*, on the cover of its February 1956 edition. Among the 13 Yugoslav graphic artists exhibiting in Zürich, Mihelič was the most appreciated by the critics, who noticed Mihelič's folk-heritage influenced motives in particular.



Fig.14. Wasp Castle, wood-cut in colour, 1957 (Pokrajinski muzej Ptuj-Ormož, photo Boris Farič)

In 1957 Mihelič exhibited at the first graphic biennial in Tokyo and at the IV Biennial in São Paulo. Several Yugoslav artists were present in Tokyo, while in São Paulo only Marko Čelebonović (1902–1986), a Serbian painter, exhibited beside Mihelič. Mihelič prepared exhaustively for São Paulo. There were 30 prints sent there, a strict selection from his post-1953 production. Ten of the prints dated from 1955, while four were made in 1956 and the next four in 1957. A special exhibition catalogue was printed for São Paulo; a brief introductory text was written by Aleksa Čelebonović (1917–1987), the brother of the painter Marko Čelebonović. Aleksa Čelebonović himself was educated as a painter, while he later worked as an art critic and organized numerous exhibitions in foreign countries. The Čelebonović text discusses the main characteristics of France Mihelič's art, mentioning the *kurent* and comparing Mihelič with James Ensor. Čelebonović described Mihelič's oeuvre as both expressionistic and surrealist and exposed his refined graphic technique; in his opinion the woodcuts were the peak of Mihelič's graphic achievements. The France Mihelič presentation in São Paulo in 1957 was honoured with an acquisition prize,¹⁸ while the Painting Grand Prix was given to Giorgio Morandi. There were many reports of France Mihelič's success in São Paulo, not only in Slovenia – all of the main Yugoslav newspapers described his exhibition as hugely important. It was, however, not the first as well as not the last successful Yugoslav presentation in São Paulo. In 1953 Petar Lubarda (1907–1974), a recognized Serbian painter, received an award, while a selection of naïve paintings from Hlebine drew the critics' attention. In 1955 it was Krsto Hegedušić who persuaded the jury to honour him and in 1959 another Slovene graphic artist – Riko Debenjak (1908–1987) – was also honoured with a major prize (Best Engraving). In 1961 two Serbian painters gained acquisition prizes: Mladen Srbinović (1925–2009) for painting and Zoran Petrović (1921–1996) for drawing. Another acquisition prize was given to Radomir Damjanović-Damnjan (born in 1936) in 1963, while in 1965 Janez Bernik (1933–2016) from Slovenia was honoured by a major prize (Best Engraving).¹⁹ Mihelič also joined the 1965 Biennial in São Paulo with an invitation to exhibit in the surrealist section. Beside him Vladimir Veličković (a Serbian painter, born in 1935) and Vasilije Jordan (a Croatian painter, born in 1934) were also chosen to participate.



Fig.15. Musical Instruments, wood-cut in colour, 1956 (Pokrajinski muzej Ptuj-Ormož, photo Boris Farič)



Fig.16. Air Travel, woodcut in colour, 1957 (Pokrajinski muzej Ptuj-Ormož, photo Boris Farič)

The prints France Mihelič exhibited in the 1950s in leading art centres in Europe and in North and South America lie at the core of his oeuvre. With great respect for his earlier and later work, which most certainly deserves all of the attention it receives from art historians, it was the graphic work from 1953 to 1959 in which Mihelič invested emotionally charged memories as well as his extensive knowledge and technical expertise. Some of the graphics from the 1950s (mostly the earlier ones) still demonstrate some of his previous dependence on the realistic world; in 1953 he let fantasy take over, removing any of the obstacles to his imagination. The classical spatial perspective is absent from the 1953 *Midsummer Night* etchings. Beings of all kinds float weightlessly in some undefined cosmos and are unrecognisable as creatures from the real world; new elements, such as various tiny cobwebs and other similar structures also appeared. Mihelič invented new fantastic forms, some of them created from extremely refined structures or gnawed through and reminiscent of worm-damaged pieces of wood; still recognizable creatures are decaying in front of our eyes or new imagined beings appear – as if from our dreams – attractive and terrifying at the same time. In the middle of the 1950s, when the appalling memories from WW II were still fresh, the threat of a third world war was already emerging and the painter himself spoke about his fear of possible atomic explosions (Novak, 1955).

In 1954 Mihelič introduced colour into his prints. We should also mention that in 1953 two exhibitions of Japanese woodcuts were held in the Modern Gallery in Ljubljana. The first one, in February, showed copies of 53 post stations on the Tokaido road; the copies after Andô Hiroshige were made by Gihachiro Okuyama (1907–1981). In June, Toshusai Sharaku's portraits of famous actors in *kabuki* theatre were exhibited. Both exhibitions attracted a lot of attention and visitors were fascinated by the

procedures of woodcut printing. There is even a mention in the Modern Gallery's documentation that France Mihelič attended the opening. From 1954 Mihelič mostly produced colour graphics, preparing several matrices for each specimen, just as the Japanese approach to woodcut demands.

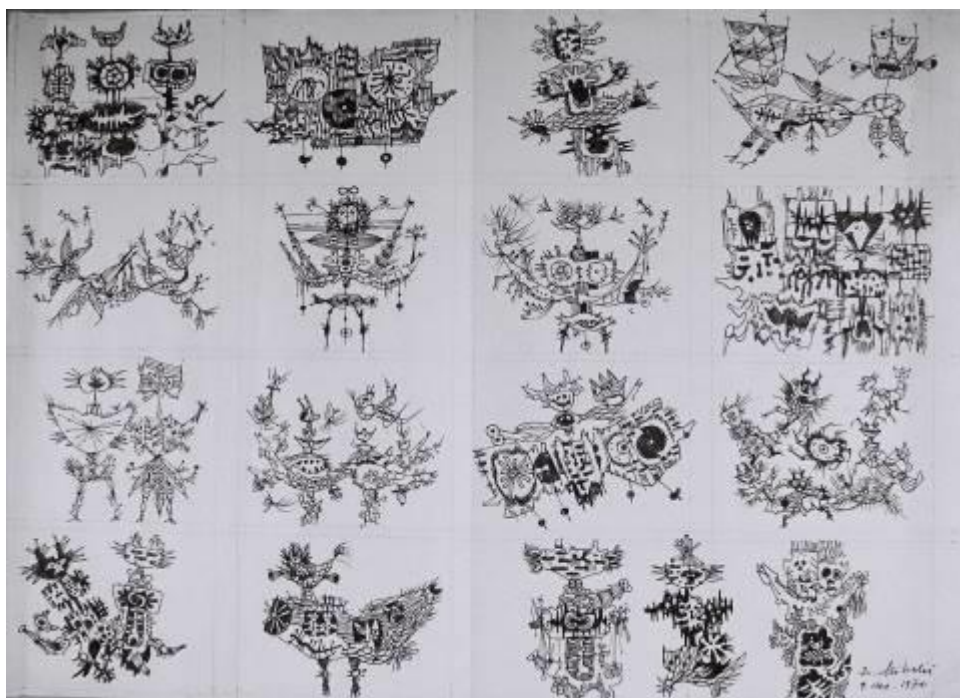


Fig.17.Drawing in ink, 1970 (Pokrajinski muzej Ptuj-Ormož, photo Boris Farič)

Conclusion

In this paper we have attempted to answer questions concerning the origins of France Mihelič's fantastic art works, which received both critical and popular acclaim in the 1950s. Mihelič's own thoughts on the origins of his work fail to provide a clear picture. In 1977 he declared:

First the natural world influenced me: the mysterious woods, their abundant and invisible world. This world and I were friends – especially the insects, which were my only toys. While this world seduced some people into biology, it seduced me into drawing. I add the stories that I was listening to as a child in our familiar house to the mysterious forces of the woods. /.../ Later, folklore entranced me: fairs, carnival masks and particularly *kurents* which drew my art literally to the edge of the fantastic. As we grow older and mature, our memories take on a deeper significance. /.../ Whatever exists in the painting reflects what the author has experienced before the age of fourteen, so said Picasso. I am of the same mind: what I created only builds upon everything I experienced and brought with me from my childhood (Gostiša, 1999: 7).

Another of Mihelič's statements, this time concerning his war experiences, should also be considered. On 3 October 1944, he gave a speech at the opening of a Slovene art club in the small town of Semič

in South-Eastern Slovenia, at the time under the control of the partisan army. His demand was that an artist should only document during wartime; there were so many powerful events and experiences that there was no time to do anything else except document them in a realistic style:

It is clear that new content will require an appropriate form. But it is impossible to make such a demand and act on it overnight. It is a question of development. Genuine artworks from our fight from liberation will be created only when the new content finds an appropriate form. (Gostiša, 1994: 324)

France Mihelič was strong enough to find the forms that he announced in his 1944 speech. However, his own emotions were not enough; he had to experience Paris and prove the results of his struggle for new forms in important art centres in Western Europe as well as in North and South America. It is significant that in 1959 Mihelič returned to oil painting after announcing this shift for some time. This was a new and complex task, and he experimented in two main ways. His attempts to transfer graphics onto oil and canvas were rather unsuccessful, while his Paris experience was much more effective: he began with highly realistic landscapes and soon turned to fantastic compositions which from 1961 brought him achieved international success.²⁰

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Notas

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¹ Western Europe was not at all recommended as a place for expanding artistic skills and knowledge. Some artists choose the Soviet Union, although they were rather rare.

² Jure Mikuz points out an article discussing the relationship of Slovene artists with the *École de Paris*, written by Noël Favrelière and published in a Slovene review *Sodobnost* already in 1975 (Favrelière 1975).

³ France Mihelič is a much respected painter in Slovenia with a comprehensive bibliography. The most systematic overview of his oeuvre is a trilogy (Gostiša, 1994; Gostiša, 1997; Gostiša, 1999).

⁴ The Academy of Art in Zagreb was established in 1921. It was the first such institution in the new state, in 1918 named the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (in 1929 the state was renamed into Kingdom Yugoslavia). The study program at the academy was rather traditional. One of the important historical models was Spanish 17th century painting. Professor Ljubo Babić (1890–1974), responsible for the art history lectures, even wrote a book about the Spanish 17th century painting (Babić 1944).

⁵ After WW II Krsto Hegedušić was engaged as a respected professor at the Zagreb art academy. With Oto Bihalji Merin (1904–1993) he supported Hlebine naïve painters who became a great success in late 1950s and especially in the 1960s and 1970s. They were most admired in Paris and were a great success at the III Biennial in São Paulo in 1955. Bihalji Merin wrote several papers and books about Yugoslav naïve art and in Zagreb a special gallery (*Galerija primitivne umjetnosti* / Gallery of Primitive Art) is still an important state institution. (Bihalji Merin 1963, Bihalji Merin 1971)

⁶ Some experts are especially engaged by Mihelič's *kurents*. (Kornelj 2002, Ciglencečki 2015)

⁷ Mikuž also mentions other names: Enrico Baj, Fabio Clerici, Leonor Fini, Henri Fischer, Jacques Hérold, Jean Houplain, Wilfredo Lam, Stanisław Lepri, Jean Lurçat, Roland Penrose, Kurt Seligman, Graham Sutherland, Jindřich Štyrský and Unica Zürn. He published the reproductions of their paintings in order to enable the comparison with France Mihelič's compositions (Mikuž, 1995: 178–201).

⁸ It has been mentioned many times that in 1961 Marcel Brion included France Mihelič into his monograph about fantastic art in Europe. Brion presented the Slovene painter as "one of the most original and authentic phenomena of contemporary fantastic art" and exposed Mihelič's *kurent* as well as his intimate experiences of wood (Brion, 1961: 20).

⁹ After France Mihelič died in 1998 his three children (Alenka Puhar, Maja Dolanc and France Mihelič Jr.) donated most of his drawings to the Regional Museum Ptuj. 2440 drawings and 97 sketchbooks are at hand for study purposes. Mihelič's drawings survived almost intact in his studio, which is of huge importance for interpretations of his work. I have to express my thanks to my colleague Tatjana Štefanič who enabled me to research in the funds of Mihelič's drawings in the museum.

¹⁰ He even made copies of old paintings in the Louvre. A copy after Luis Le Nain (*Forge*, 1642/43, Louvre) is preserved (Gostiša, 1999: 249).

¹¹ I would like to express my gratitude to Alenka Puhar, Mihelič's daughter, for offering me help while preparing this article. Alenka Puhar is a writer and a human rights activist, devoted to the legacy of her father and other Slovene intellectuals from the 20th century.

¹² Some years ago a young colleague from the Prague Art History Institute asked me if there were any collections of Japanese woodcuts and/or African ritual masks in Slovenia which could be considered as the foundation of Slovene modernism. Tomáš Winter wrote an excellent book about such collections in Bohemia (Winter, 2010).

¹³ The architect Ivan Jager (1871–1959) who travelled much of his life, moved from Slovenia in 1901, living first in Beijing and from 1902 in the USA. He possessed a collection of around 300 Japanese woodcuts which his widow donated to the Slovene Academy of Art and Science in 1967. The collection was publicly presented in 2005 in Ljubljana (Pajšar 2005). After a long period in East Africa, the Czech anthropologist Vladimír František Foit (1900–1971) moved to Europe and found asylum in Slovenia in Velenje. The municipality in Velenje offered him and his wife a home and regular financial support, which they accepted. They then donated a valuable collection of artefacts and documentation from expeditions to East Africa to Velenje museum where the exhibition is on permanent display (<http://www.saleskibiografiskileksikon.si/index.php?action=view&tag=668>). Neither of these collections could have inspired Slovene artists in their modernistic experiments, as they were both presented publically too late.

¹⁴ The sheet of newspaper is preserved by Mihelič's daughter Alenka Puhar.

¹⁵ Under the influence of the Ljubljana Biennial of Graphic Arts, the so-called Ljubljana Graphic School developed. France Mihelič is one of its most respected representatives. Slovene graphic art was highly respected for its technical perfection and refined use of colour. Graphic art in Slovenia was on one hand linked to the strong tradition of the partisan graphic activities during WW II, while on the other it was later focused on Paris – in Johnny Friedlaender's studio in Paris many Slovene artists expanded their knowledge from the late 1950s on (Kržišnik, 1997).

¹⁶ The documentation department in the Modern Gallery in Ljubljana holds a lot of material documenting France Mihelič's oeuvre; however, the material concerning his presentations abroad, especially during the earlier years, is not complete. I would like to express my gratitude to Jana Ferjan, a documentarist, who helped me in my research. Another tour of Yugoslav graphics was organized by the Modern Gallery in Ljubljana in 1963 and Mihelič was invited again to participate; he prepared three graphics from 1959. In 1970 the Society of Slovene Artists invited Mihelič to participate in an exhibition of Slovene graphics in Lima. In 1978 Mihelič participated again in a huge presentation of Yugoslav contemporary art in several states of South America. In order to encourage the artists to confirm their participation, it was stressed that after WW II South America had developed into an important centre of modern art; it is further explained that in South American countries modern aesthetics was accepted quickly and with no compromises while their own heritage characterises contemporary creativity with extreme authenticity. (From the Alenka Puhar archive.)

¹⁷ In 1957 Jean Bouret was less inclined toward Mihelič while reporting from the II Biennial of Graphic Art in Ljubljana (Bouret, 1957: 166–169).

¹⁸ From the archive of the Biennial in São Paulo France Mihelič (and undoubtedly all the other participants) received a letter with a request to donate all documentation concerning his artistic activities. It is uncertain if Mihelič sent any documentation to São Paulo. (The letter is preserved by Alenka Puhar.)

¹⁹ I would like to express my gratitude to Prof. Maria de Fátima Morethy Couto for offering me help while gathering data concerning various awards at the São Paulo Biennial.

²⁰ A painting titled *Clocks* (1961) was bought by *Musée d'art moderne* in Paris. As so many surrealist and fantastic painters Mihelič used clocks as one of his beloved motives. Anyhow, it was not only a commonly surrealistic depository of motives he was borrowing from; he was inspired also by the painting on the beehives which in Slovenia has a rich tradition. (Gostiša, 1999 : 293)

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