

GENRE MIGRATION IN “ARTIST” BY NIKOLA PETROV

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Abstract: The study aims at identifying, examining and analyzing the dynamics in the genre of the picture “Artist” by Nikola Petrov and the reasons for its migration aspirations. Evidence is argumentatively applied in defence of the thesis that at different stages of the artistic life of the work it comes under three well-grounded distinct painting genres; self-portrait, portrait (single and double) and one figure composition (with the “presence” of a latent image). The hypothesis of genre migration is built on the basis of circumstances and facts that “accompany” the work from its creation till becoming part of a donation by the heirs of the author to a gallery in his hometown. An idea is argued that the simultaneous presence of several genres in the painting is unique for Bulgarian art from the early 20th century, which dimensions could only be rationalized when compared with current ideas and practices in art and nowadays views of portraying in particular. An inference is made in the text by proving that the hypothesis also applies to subsequent paradigm shifts with the time regarding portraying.

Keywords: *genre migration, Nikola Petrov, self-portrait, donation, Vidin.*

In October 2001 the “Nikola Petrov” Art Gallery in Vidin, named after the renowned Bulgarian painter, received a unique donation from his heirs¹. It consisted of anatomical drawings, a notebook with tasks and constructive perspective sketches, a landscape with the towers of the Vidin castle in the background, seen from the water-filled north moat (oil on canvas, student work of the artist), a wooden palette, a medallion with an unfinished child portrait, a photo of the artist (made at the international exhibition in Liege, Belgium, with dedication written on the back dated May, 20th 1905² and a family portrait from

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¹ As the museum director at the time of the donation I express my sincere respect and gratitude to Mrs. Lyulina Nedelcheva for her invaluable and noble act.

² The dedication on the back of the photograph taken at the exhibition in Liege, Belgium (1905), reads “Truly, Bai Stefane, you were one of a kind for me. Nikola Petrov” In a period of three months Nikola Petrov visited Brussels, Munich, Vienna and Budapest.

1919, taken at the posthumous exhibition), and a pastel drawing depicting the seated figure of the artist in front of an easel measuring 24 cm × 34 cm.

Milena Georgieva³, researcher of the period the listed works fall into, defines it as "...crucial for the formation of Nikola Petrov as a modern artist" and states the reasons and conditions that aided the transformation as well as the time of its immediate manifestation: "... However, Protich does not rule out the influence Neo-impressionism might have had on N. Petrov during his stay in Belgium and the great art hubs of Western Europe. Despite the fact that all other researchers emphasize mainly on Nikola Petrov's travels to the West in 1905 as the main factor for the artistic development of his modern view on painting, in my opinion, the turning point in his work does not occur immediately after his return, but rather after the South Slavic Exhibition in Sofia in 1906. It should be noted, that the change in his style, or its maturation to be more precise, cannot be noticed until 1908-1909".

Certainly, as a turning point, the importance of that period stems from the fact that it contains the mental image of the subsequent evolution of the artist. At the same time it includes the message of the possible but unrealized development and potential. The latter acquires profound meaning when correlated with the short "cultural time"⁴ when the opportunity to transform it into artistic reality still existed. A period of self-reflection, contemplation and synthesis of the accumulated information and influence by the dominating European ideas on painting that resonated within the Balkans.

For 85 years the heirs of the artist kept his works as intimate and cherished testimony of the lofty spirit of their inspired relative, and his legacy (through the donation) finally travelled back to his birthplace, Vidin. The wandering soul of this daring creator of beauty found embattled peace.

On suitable occasions, the family would show the valuable relics. The art critic Dimitar Avramov in his essay⁵ on the life and creative work of the artist writes: "...*The daughter of the artist now keeps his detailed notes on the history of art, diligent anatomical drawings with Latin inscriptions and a thick notebook on constructive perspective, filled with complex tasks and precisely drawn designs suggesting speculative conclusions. In addition, there are numerous sketches of heads as well...*".

³ Milena Georgieva, *South Slav Dialogues in Modernism. Bulgarian Art and the Art of Serbia, Croatia and Slovenia 1904-1912*, Sofia, Bulgarian Artist Publishing House, 2003, p. 368.

⁴ Svilen Stefanov uses this term to describe the time when contemporary in their essence and importance works are created.

⁵ Dimitar Avramov, *The Unfortunate Fate of the Artist. A Century after the birth of Nikola Petrov*, Narodna Kultura Publishing, 1981; A text provided by Mrs. Maria Avramova for publishing on <http://kultura.bg/web/>.



Fig. 1. The family of the artist, photograph taken at the posthumous exhibition, 1919 (This photo belongs to “Nikola Petrov” Art Museum, Vidin).



Fig. 2. “Artist”, a pastel drawing depicting the seated figure of the artist in front of an easel measuring 24 cm × 34 cm. (Nikola Petrov Gallery).



Fig. 3. Nikola Petrov in his studio, photograph, 1905; “The Citizens of Vidin”, Almanac, Vidin, 2006.

Over the past eight decades the nature of the interest in this precious heritage has varied widely: from sincere belief in the “creative power” of “the most significant artist”, attested by Andrei Protich, “a man who supports, understands and influences him – competent, erudite and extremely sensitive”, to openly mercantile in the 80s and 90s of the last century. The catalog for the exhibition of Nikola Petrov in the National Gallery (December, 2001) chronologically specified the dates and circumstance of the purchase of every item. In the catalog we can read that “from the posthumous exhibition of the artist (1919) were purchased (totaling 17,800 leva) *The Woman of the Artist, Nude Girl and Marketplace in Peshtera*... The same year, but probably from the artist’s studio, A. Protich personally selected nine more works – oil studies, sketches, pastels, watercolors, drawings... Later, in 1924 Protich buys from the widow of the artist *The Bansko Square* for the significant amount of 8,000 leva...”. After 1948 “especially significant is the purchase of part of the private collection of A. Protich”. Besides the qualities listed above by D. Sokolova in her essay published in the catalog of the exhibition at the National Gallery (December, 2001), it would seem that Nikola Petrov’s like-minded friend was also prone to the collector’s temptation. It is natural to assume that his family would make similar requited gestures as a sign of gratitude to Protich. Common practice for such a relationship was an offer to select a drawing or a small sized work. Probably over the years before the donation, the collection of original works, artifacts, photographs and painting tools of the artist kept by his family had diminished. In order to find the common factor that

characterizes the donation as “residue of the whole” we have to take into account the estimated emotional filter inherited like legacy by the descendants of the artist⁶.

With this in mind while examining the case in point, some logical questions arise: What made the descendants keep as relics those exact objects? Why the subsequent vicissitudes of time failed to “separate” them? Is it possible that the family felt (as a personal experience) a mystical spirituality emanating from them? And if so, what led to the formation of such a strong emotional attachment?

In search of an answer we will focus our attention on the pastel portrait in the donation, which along with 12 other paintings constitute the group of well-known, listed or well preserved pastel works, sketches, heads, portraits and several nude figures. Common in all the paintings is the prevalent human presence and the fact that the majority were painted in the years between 1906 and 1909. This is established by Irina Mihalcheva⁷ while listing the works included in exhibitions of the societies “Modern Art” and “Lada” in which the artist participated and which made possible their approximate dating. The work was recorded in the register with the inventory No. 298/30.10.2001, under the name “Portrait of an Artist” – a name which is more suitable for a literary work than a work of art. The curator who did the inventory complied with the name given by the donor, although the artist displayed it at two consecutive exhibitions: IV Art Exhibition of the “Contemporary Art” Society (“...usually displayed around Christmas...”, 1907-1908) and the exhibition of the Union of South Slavic Artists “Lada” in Zagreb (1908) under the name “Artist”. Under the same name Milena Georgieva published it as an image in the monograph “South Slav Dialogues in Modernism. Bulgarian Art and the Art of Serbia, Croatia and Slovenia 1904-1912” (2003). The gallery which owned it was indicated and the work was dated “about 1908”⁸.

What led to this discrepancy in the names and why was a single-figure painting, essentially in the memory of the people closest to the artist, allowed to leave the boundaries of its genre and freely pass to the more personified genre of the portrait? Is it possible the clarification that the portrait is of the artist does not appear as a result of their desire to reconcile two truths – in this particular case – the formal and the personal? Can such an insignificant name change unlock a possible hypothesis in discovering the objective truth? Referencing concepts and views on the creation and perception of art by Petrov’s contemporaries while investigating the issue will provide the necessary starting point and basis, assisting

⁶ Veska Draganova (wife of the artist); Iliana Mehlemova (daughter of the artist) graduated from Robert College in Istanbul. Worked as a radio host in Sofia Radio (the English broadcast) when the director was S. Skitnik; Lyulina Nedelcheva (grand-daughter of the artist and the person who made the donation) is a poet and Literary expert (the information was provided by Dr. Tahoki Sarkisyan, niece of the artist and daughter of Paraskeva – Nikola Petrov's sister).

⁷ Irina Mihalcheva, *Nikola Petrov*, Bulgarian Artist Publishing House, Sofia, 1976, pp. 12-18.

⁸ Most likely Nikola Petrov creates the painting earlier. If we take into consideration the aforementioned exhibitions, it can be safely assumed that the latest possible date is the previous year – 1907.

the vibrations of the constantly changing art form to match its own content. Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz⁹ in his collection of philosophical essays on art “New Forms in Painting and the Misunderstandings Arising Therefrom” states that: “...the beholder experiences the unity of his being by capturing the artistic perception through the objective work, the artist on the other hand, experiences this state the moment the concept becomes clear, or even to a lesser extent, the moment of its external manifestation. Thereafter he can become his own beholder and this is the most profound way to experience himself in unison with his own creation. That is why, if the artist is truly pleased with his own work his artistic conscience is clear, and no person is happier than he is”.

Nikola Petrov, clearly pleased with the achieved result, displays the painting at two important exhibitions at the time, and the short-lived implicit happiness experienced by his unity with his work was greatly amplified through his heirs.

A portrait-photograph¹⁰ that captures the exact moment “when the concept becomes clear”, unlocks the reasoning in a completely new direction. Namely, that the artist intended the picture to be a self-portrait. This explains why the heirs later changed the name trying to “communicate” the artist’s intention. The photograph was taken in the artist’s studio and presented Nikola Petrov half-faced, sitting on a folding chair in front of a tripod. The head is in semi-profile and the movement allows the eye to “see” the camera/lens/viewer. The left hand holds a palette and a set of brushes used for the different colors. The right hand is raised in a frozen motion, holding a brush reaching for the canvas. The year is 1905. The photograph captured the moment of the beginning of work on a new painting and the presence of the photographer seems to surprise the work-absorbed painter. If we imagine ourselves in the place of the anonymous but unquestionably skillful photographer, and then “move” in the space behind the easel, we will witness first-hand the already known story behind “Artist”. An ingenious decision and a challenge for the “conscientious” graphic artist who studied constructive perspective. Using the imaginary movement of the camera the artist intuitively applies an original cinematic technique¹¹ in his painting, but also manages to combine the intended design with the artist’s ego, by transforming it into an “acceptable compromise” and replacing the mirror with photography. By using a photograph and later slightly adjusting the point of view, the artist solves the issue with the possible lack of an appropriately sized mirror, necessary for the implementation of such an idea.

The conclusion is based on an imaginary rotation of the focal point in the photograph from 1905. After turning the painting counter-clockwise a second

⁹ Polish painter, art philosopher, writer, playwright I. S. Witkiewicz, *New Forms in Painting and the Misunderstandings Arising Therefrom*, SONM Publishing, Sofia, 2011, p. 141.

¹⁰ The picture is from 1905 and was published in the almanac “The citizens of Vidin”, August 2006. It was presented by the local historian Hristo Lishkov.

¹¹ Segundo de Chomón, film director and cinematic pioneer, who used a *camera dolly* for the first time in the 1914 movie *Cabiria*.

shape can be seen, intertwined in the structure of the large painting locales. The body (in dark clothing) of the seated figure in the background transforms into the hair, throwing shadow on the forehead, of young bright-eyed woman with expressive eyebrows. Her gaze “misses” the viewer and instead looks outside the painting at what might be the reason or the object of the artistic act. The mysterious muse emerges, as if from the very being of the artist, her oval and facial features remind of the protagonist in “Girl with a Straw-hat” – also a pastel portrait, created in 1906. The hypothesis, that Nikola Petrov had entwined the face of the model into his self-portrait, transforms the work of art into a self-portrait of an artist with a hidden image of a model. Similar artistic mutualism isn’t characteristic for the known works of the painter, and the symbiosis between an artist and a model adds enigma and mysticism to the painting by utilizing this technique inherent to Symbolism. The gesture of inclusion of the “missing mirror” presents us with the opportunity to make various interpretations which are not the focus of this text. In this particular case, it is important to us to understand the dynamics in the genre of the painting and our analysis aims to reveal the reasoning behind its pursuit of genre migration.

At different stages of its history, the work analyzed by us has come under three well-grounded distinct painting genres: self-portrait, portrait and single-figure painting – each demonstrating its own characteristics, appearance and formation at a certain stage of the historical development of art. The simultaneous presence of the three genres in the painting “Artist” is a unique phenomenon in the Bulgarian art from the early 20th century. The relativity in defining the genre of the painting is actually the result of the development of the artist’s message. A message that acquired the meaning of encoded self-manifesto; its declarations are directly correlated to the identity of the protagonist. In this context, the subsequent conceptual generalizations in the picture are the possible natural and logical developments in the form of a secondary accumulation of additional meanings in the painting “passing” through the three hypostases.

The time that separates us from the creation of the painting “Artist” justifies and rationalizes (contrary to formal logic) the issue of clarifying the migration of its genre. The suggested analysis attains importance when comparing the painting to current ideas and practices in art, or in particular – the changed view on portraits, result of the natural development of art. In his article¹² on the Bulgarian art in the 90s, Svilen Stefanov summarizes: “What all the views on painting in the 90s have in common is the that they depart from the conventional means of expression of this medium and commence the implementation of visions and strategies from theatre, photography, films and various others ... it is a fact, that the changes had a unified character, going beyond the simplified division between *new*

¹² Svilen Stefanov, *The Transformations of Bulgarian painting of the 90^s. The Postmodern doubt in the “traditional matter”?*, Varna, Liter Net, 2003, available web <http://litenet.bg/publish8/svstefanov/transformaciite.htm>

and *old* means of expression”¹³. We witness “the art of painting unfolding to so many new frontiers”¹⁴ accompanied with blurring of the boundaries between genres in contemporary painting. The portrait is no longer a simple artistic image of a person in a static position that by recreating the features of the model strives to reveal the models spiritual state and character, but a work of art that intends to study the deep complexity of the social and psychological experiences in contemporary life. On the other hand, the creation of a self-portrait is more often used as a pretext for its ability to represent and provoke contemplation on social issues from a first person perspective. It is the strive to find the answers of objective social questions by means of esthetically synthesized intuitions, surpassing its individual character. In this sense, the suggested hypothesis on the genre of “Artist” can be verified by its conditional concordance with the new contexts that manifest and express the act of portrayal. A logical conclusion is that the hypothesis is formally valid in terms of the changes in time related to the paradigm of portrait painting.

The phenomenon which caused the paradox here is that, once unlocked, the genre migration is in constant orbit around the work of art and dominates its metaphysical integrity. And in pursuit of its Ouroboros, it symbolically “embeds” the battered soul of the artist as well. An orbit at the height of which Nikola Petrov was described as “the most talented” Bulgarian artist.

¹³ *Ibidem.*

¹⁴ *Ibidem.*