

The Emancipatory Potential of Karaman's Concept of "Peripheral Art": Still Operative?

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When viewed within its broader European context, the entire premodern Croatian architectural and artistic heritage is characterized by some atypical features. The traditional Eurocentric art-historical narrative follows regional and national paradigms, recognizing trails of political and cultural dominance that emit style and form from centers of power toward near and distant areas in what are usually seen as concentric circles. In the continental parts of Croatia those influences were mostly of a Central European nature, while on the Adriatic coastline there was a continuous flow of Italic influences. However, a cultural bipolarity developed when the long continuity of Roman civilization that extended in the eastern Adriatic communities throughout the medieval period was countered by that of the ninth-century Croatian kingdom whose cultural milieu would permeate that of the coastal Romanized towns. Such fusion of traditions, cultures, and collective experiences, which generated a peculiar *genius loci* at the confluence of the East and the West, later was dominated by Venice, while the Balkan hinterland was ruled by the Ottoman Empire. Early- to mid-twentieth-century art historians who adhered to fragmentary and nationally biased interpretation often saw eastern Adriatic medieval and early-modern art as a weakened provincial reflection of what was imported from Italian centers.¹ Such writings were subsequently abused by pre-World War II politics as proof of a territorial claim by Italy to the whole Adriatic rim, sometimes even as an indication of Italian superiority over Slavic (Croatian and Slovenian) ethnicity or race. Correspondingly, nationalistic Croatian opposition to these pretenses used identical methodological patterns in quest of architectural and artistic features that would be the expression of "pure national identity." Their projections found appropriate explanation in the writings of J. Strzygowski, a prominent Viennese art historian of the formal school,² who believed that all of European medieval art was an expression of "barbarous genius" of German (and to a lesser degree Slavic) ethnos. In 1929 Strzygowski published a thesis asserting that triple-braided decorative forms and their respective architecture, which spread widely in the art of the ninth- to the eleventh-century Croatian kingdom, were the expression of a "Croatian national spirit."³ His ideas were immediately exploited throughout Dalmatia in political projections of the idea of national genius⁴ but soon were opposed by academic dissent.

Ljubo Karaman (1886–1971) was one of the pioneers of the Croatian art history that originated out of the Viennese formal school. However, he was able to critically recognize methodological flaws and to soundly contextualize artistic phenomena, consequently creating the foundation for a new understanding of national heritage in its natural developmental context, enabling its emancipation from both colonial and nationalistic manipulative discourses.⁵ Though he continued the traditional geographical paradigm, Karaman did not see the transfer of style from artistic centers exclusively as a process of political or cultural domination or even national adoption, but as a function of what Strzygowski previously defined as “powers of movement” that accompanied political dominance, merchandise pathways, and directions of social and cultural flow in general. Concurrently, there are “powers of persistence” emitted by indigenous traditions and tendencies, determined by the social and economic situation. Karaman observed that the latter cannot be a factor of cultural persistence due to its ever-changing nature, but is still a crucial determinant of artistic production. Realizing that preceding art historians had overemphasized one or the other power, Karaman arrived at three paradigmatic concepts that determined the position of local artistic production: borderline, provincialized, and peripheral.

Borderline architecture and art would be those of the areas that merged heterogeneous influences from different artistic centers, often competently and with interesting results. Provincialized art is basically dependent on influences from major centers, transformed by the impact of social and economic circumstances. Economic factors include use of local material, modest and restrained forms, and the *métier* that lacks the virtuosity of the centers. Social circumstances are reflected in naive or misinformed iconographical interpretation, inorganic and nonfunctional use of decorative elements, expressivity to the extent of grimace, fantastic features, unusual chromatics, and repetition and emulation of locally established types. Karaman saw that provincialized art lacked a solid organic link with indigenous, or, more precisely, regional tendencies. But it was not seen in deprecatory terms, since Karaman dialectically recognized a certain amount of freedom that enabled the inclusion of local, regional elements through symbiosis of ethnic and regional influences with weakened impulses that emanated from centers of art and political power.

Such dialectics eventually led him to recognize the most creative category of regional art, the peripheral, which displayed a more indigenous authentic expression adhering to what C.

Norberg-Schulz would subsequently identify as *genius loci*. This category included the most appreciated phenomena and examples that had accomplished a "wide synthesis" of heterogeneous influences acquired and reinvented in "the creative freedom of peripheral ambience." Such liberty of development, unrestricted by artistic authorities and examples of great masters, enabled the emergence of art that would have been suppressed in cultural centers. Peripheral art thus reaches the full developmental potential of regional artistic utterance, preserving the link with the stylistic environmental context of European art, but showing unrestricted developmental possibilities of regional *genius loci*. Thus, the peripheral ambient is not merely a passive recipient of ideas and style.

Even though Karaman's categorization lacked thorough theoretical elaboration, it was well received by Croatian art historians and makers of university curricula of the 1960s and 1970s, who appreciated his empirical experience and dialectic contextualization, which formed the firm groundwork of the discipline. One of the reasons for its applicability was the proficient elimination of ideological, political, and nationalist mythologems that dominated the troubled twentieth century of the Adriatic rim. Radovan Ivančević recognized that its synthetic nature played a cohesive role, preventing the atomization of the discipline and its reflection on university curricula.⁶ However, the categories had also been subjected to criticism, particularly because of their single-linear, positivistic nature, and adherence to a linear bipolarity of relation between center and periphery. Milan Prelog remarked that such an approach lacks the insight into the metabolism of regional art, functions, and relations among heterogeneous layers within a single art-historical or ethnic unit.⁷ Božidar Gagro objected that Karaman's notions were too closely linked to national or geographical paradigms, since even liberated peripheral art is seen in relation to that of the center. The peripheral phenomenon should be observed outside of the standard system of thesis-antithesis, such as central-peripheral, universal-national. Regional art should be articulated and interpreted according to its own values, not those set by the center. However, Gagro's questioning of the essence of regional or national art seems to extract Karaman's particularities of the peripheral: "It is different from all that is outside and different, it is always its own, always something else: the other structure."

Still, Gagro does not dismiss the importance of artistic communication with the centers because "despite the basic impossibility of transferring the more advanced, exogenous style, a series of subsequent attempts to implant the shoots of another species has had a favorable

impact on endogenous tendencies, encouraging their appearance and formation.” However, they should be judged per their own context and values, not the preconstructions and clichés of the art histories of the centers. By setting an alternative system of values, regional art history would be able to reinterpret and critically value local production regardless of period.⁸

Since their reception, Karaman's concepts have been modified, updated, and methodologically reinvented. However, they are still integrated within contemporary contextual methodologies to an extent that we should question whether their traditional geographical paradigm might act as a hindrance to the wider acceptance of alternative methodologies. At any rate, contemporary Croatian art history of the medieval and early-modern periods has since turned its focus towards contextualization and determination of manifold relations between the artwork, the artist, and society, but most of the insights are still imbued with the concepts of the peripheral or provincialized in the most emancipated sense of their relation to mainstream artistic production of Europe through the centuries. Karaman's insistence on the emancipatory nature of peripheral art was conceived exclusively upon the relation to artistic centers and thus maintains certain semicolonial aspects. But his focus on regional conditions of the periphery, including their own internal energies and developmental logic, formed the earliest concepts to resolve what was then perceived of as a colonial or nationalistic narrative of regional history of art and architecture. This narrative still needs to be challenged, questioned, and repositioned in the broader context of ideas emerging from the global networking of art history.

Notes

¹ Adolfo Venturi, *Dalmazia monumentale* (Milan: Alfieri and Lacroix, 1917). For a recent Italian critic of such an approach see Maria Giulia Aurigemma, “Giovanni Dalmata e la Dalmazia nei viaggi e negli scritti di Adolfo Venturi, *Storia dell’Arte*, no.139, new series 39 (2014): 5–20. In this context, even more indicative than A. Venturi’s, is the publication by Alessandro Dudan, *La Dalmazia nell’arte italiana: Venti secoli di civiltà* (Milan: publisher unknown, 1922), reprinted by (Rovinj/Rovigno, Croatia: Centro di Ricerche Storice, 1999).

² Suzanne L. Marchand, “The Rhetoric of Artifacts and the Decline of Classical Humanism: The Case of Josef Strzygowski,” *History and Theory* 33, no. 4 (December 1994): 106–30.

³ Josef Strzygowsky, *Forschungen zur Entwicklung der altkroatischen Kunst* (Vienna: publisher unknown, 1926); translated from the German to Croatian as *Starohrvatska umjetnost: O razvitku starohrvatske umjetnosti* (Zagreb: Matica Hrvatska, 1927).

⁴ Nevenko Bartulin, *The Racial Idea in the Independent State of Croatia: Origins and Theory*, (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 186–87. Such understanding of the triple-braided decorative motif is

still widely popular, particularly during and after the early 1990s Croatian War of Independence. Also, a number of pre-Romanesque buildings and artifacts are deeply rooted in visual imagery of national narrative to the extent that when scholars question some widely accepted dogmas related to those objects, they provoke belligerent reactions, as in the recent events regarding doubts of the Croatian origin of Višeslav's baptismal font.

⁵ Seminal Karaman publications that gradually developed these ideas were: *Iz kolijevke hrvatske prošlosti* (Zagreb: Matica Hrvatska, 1930); *Umjetnost u Dalmaciji: XV i XVI vijek* (Zagreb: Matica Hrvatska, 1933); and were ultimately elaborated in *O djelovanju domaće sredine u umjetnosti hrvatskih krajeva* (Zagreb: Društvo Historičara Umjetnosti NRH, 1963), reprinted as *Problemi periferijske umjetnosti* (Zagreb: Institut za Povijest Umjetnosti, 2001). For a survey of Karaman's ideas in Italian see Jasenka Gudelj, *Ljubo Karaman e i problemi di arte periferica, Arte e architettura: I cornici della storia*, ed. F. Bardati et al. (Milan: Mondadori, 2008), 261–72.

⁶ Radovan Ivančević, “Ljubo Karaman, Mit i stvarnost,” *Radovi Instituta za Povijest Umjetnosti* 11 (1987): 165–85.

⁷ Milan Prelog, “Umjetnost na tlu Jugoslavije između Europe i Mediterana,” *Peristil* 21 (1978): 13–14.

⁸ Božidar Gagro, “Peripheral Structure from Karas to Exat,” *Život Umjetnosti* 78–79 (2006): 154–65 (an English translation of the article originally published in *Život Umjetnosti* 1 [1966]: 15–25, *passim*).