

*Jadranka Beresford-Peirse is Founder and Trustee of The International Trust for Croatian Monuments*  
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## **CROATIA** ACROSS BORDERS

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In January this year Croatia adopted the euro in place of the kuna and joined the European Union's Schengen Area, allowing free movement across the country's borders with Slovenia and Hungary. In the words of the country's prime minister, Andrej Plenković, 'nothing is the same after this'. These developments are a culmination of thirty-five years of change that have steadily drawn Croatia more closely into the orbit of western Europe: its first democratic elections, in 1990; its declaration of independence from Yugoslavia in 1991; the conclusion of the War of Independence in 1995; and membership of the European Union from 2013. The country's reorientation from the former Communist Balkans to the democracies of western and central Europe now seems complete – it has been sealed in symbolic terms by Croatia's giddy ascent to the top tier of world football. In terms of foreign visitors, the country's Dalmatian coast is facing the problems of



over-visiting endured by other European tourist honey pots: in 2019 Dubrovnik (which has a population of just over 42,000) received almost 1.5 million visitors, more than either Venice or Barcelona per head of population.

Yet in terms of international art-historical scholarship Croatia has remained marginal to a surprising degree, beyond simply the fact that – as Czech, Hungarian or Romanian art historians might also emphasise – European art history has been very slow to shift its centre of gravity south-east. Language is undoubtedly a barrier but it has proved permeable in both directions. To take only recent articles published in this Magazine as an example, in 2021 the Croatian art historian Ana Šverko published an unknown group of drawings of the Dalmatian coast by Charles-Louis Clérisseau,[1] and in the present issue (pp.1074–81) the Italian art historian Beatrice Tanzi publishes an attribution to Giovanni Bellini of a painting of the Virgin and Child in a monastery on the island of Pag. Tanzi gently chides her international colleagues for having so completely ignored the substantial Croatian literature on the panel.

It is probably not a coincidence that both articles concern art in or about Dalmatia, which, largely because of its links to Italy, has tended to be the principal focus for foreign historians working on Croatian art. The country's artists tend to be well known only if they worked elsewhere – Andrea Schiavone and Giulio Clovio, for example, were based in Venice and Rome respectively. The leading late Gothic and early Renaissance artists who stayed in Croatia, such as Lovro Dobričević and Nikola Božidarević, are barely even names outside the country.[2] Most of the monuments and works of art for which Croatia is best known are in Dalmatia – they include, for example, Diocletian's Palace, Split, and the spectacular Renaissance sculptural ensemble of the Chapel of the Blessed Giovanni Orsini in the cathedral of St Lawrence, Trogir. Yet in cultural as well as geographical terms the country has two axes – its Adriatic coast and archipelagos extending south-east, and its inland plains, centred on the capital, Zagreb, facing north, towards Hungary and Austria.

Art history in Croatia was established at the University of Zagreb in 1878 by Izidor Iso Kršnjavi (1845–1927), who had studied the subject in Vienna and painting in Munich. He was one of the founders of the Museum of Arts and Crafts in Zagreb in 1880, a younger sibling of the Museum für Angewandte Kunst, Vienna, and the Museum of



Applied Arts, Budapest. These cities, with Munich, were the main influences on the artists who created an underrated branch of the Secession in Croatia, of which the best-known name is Viktor Kovačić (1874–1924), thanks in part to the preservation as a museum of the apartment he designed for himself on the Masarykova, Zagreb. All these movements – art-historical (and archaeological) studies, Arts and Crafts and Secessionist architecture and design – were inspired by nationalist ideas, something that Croatia shared with other national groupings within the Austro-Hungarian Empire and elsewhere. The issue continues to be a focus for art history in Croatia: as the art historian Zoë Opačić wrote in 2013: ‘in the recent dramatic past of the country, art has been used to define its identity and attract emotional and intellectual responses to its predicament’.[3] A decade on, such an approach seems out of step with the increasingly global outlook of art historians in Western Europe and North America. It has also perhaps led to a neglect in Croatia of aspects of its past that fit less easily into a nationalist narrative, such as the country’s Orthodox heritage.

Such issues are less to the fore in two major areas in which Croatian culture is unconstrained by national borders: architectural conservation and contemporary art. The impact on the country’s cultural heritage of the War of Independence – in which over 20,000 Croatians were killed – was often devastating. The country has also endured natural disasters in the form of earthquakes, most recently in 2020 in Zagreb and Petrinja. Croatia has worked in collaboration with foreign organisations, both NGOs and private charities, to restore monuments and train conservators. One of the best known of these charities is the International Trust for Croatian Monuments, founded in London in 1991 ‘to raise awareness of the rich cultural and artistic heritage of Croatia and to raise funds for the restoration and preservation of those sites that have become threatened either by war, neglect or lack of funding’. As well as providing finance for the restoration of historic architecture and works of art, the Trust has helped Croatian art historians and conservators to study abroad.

From the 1950s onwards artists in Croatia benefited from the relatively (by Communist standards) relaxed attitudes of the authorities to contemporary movements in art outside the Eastern bloc. As a result, the country had its own forms of Abstract Expressionism – for example, in the work of Edo Murtić – neo-Constructivism and kinetic art. Croatian artists have represented the country independently at the



Venice Biennale since 1993, most recently Tomo Savić-Gecan in 2022. Zagreb's Museum of Contemporary Art, opened in its present building by Igor Franić in 2009, seeks to present Croatian artists in both a national and international context, so that for example its retrospective in 2021 on one of the most celebrated modern Croatian artists, Ivan Kožarić, set out to insert him into a broad history of modern sculpture.[4] Such curatorial endeavours reinforce the growing understanding of art historians outside Croatia that this magically beautiful country is no longer on the margins, if indeed it ever was.

[1] A. Šverko: 'Clérisseau's journey to Dalmatia: a newly attributed collection of drawings', *THE BURLINGTON MAGAZINE* 163 (2021), pp.492–502.

[2] On Božidarević, however, see the illuminating chapter by Joško Belamarić in Croatia: Aspects of Art, Architecture and Cultural Heritage, London 2009, pp.108–19. This multi-author book is the best overview in English of Croatian cultural heritage before 1800.

[3] In a review of the catalogue accompanying the exhibition 'Et ils s'émerveillèrent...' L'art médiéval en Croatie' at the Musée de Cluny, Paris, *THE BURLINGTON MAGAZINE* 155 (2013), pp.554–55, at p.554.

[4] See the review by Penelope Curtis in this Magazine, 163 (2021), pp.944–45.

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"LETTERS TO THE EDITOR", *BURLINGTON MAGAZINE*, NOVEMBER 2023, VOL 165, NO 1448

Sir, As the founding trustee of the London-based organisation the International Trust for Croatian Monuments, I was pleased to read the Editorial in the October issue, 'Croatia across borders' (p.1051), which was prompted by Beatrice Tanzi's article 'A new attribution to Giovanni Bellini: the "Virgin and Child" in Pag' (pp.1074–81). I thought that readers of *The Burlington Magazine* might like to have drawn to their attention a recent piece of good news about Croatia's medieval heritage. This is the return of a fourteenth-century processional cross to the Franciscan friary at Zadar, from which it was stolen in 1974. This gilded silver and enamel cross, which depicts the patron saints of Zadar, was purchased in good faith at auction by the Lia family, who have generously returned it to its original home. The cross was first identified by the art historian Donal Cooper in 2009, when it was in the Amedeo Lia Museum in La Spezia. Anyone interested in the Franciscan heritage of Croatia should read his chapter 'Gothic Art and the Friars





in Late Medieval Croatia 1212–1460’ in the book *Croatia: Aspects of Art, Architecture and Cultural Heritage*, published by Frances Lincoln, London, in 2009. For a full account of the cross, published while it was still missing, see M. Kovačević: ‘Ophodni križ – još jedan anžuvinski “ex voto” u Zadru?’ (‘Processional cross – another Angevin “ex voto” in Zadar?’), *Radovi Instituta za Povijest Umjetnosti* 31 (2007), pp.29–42.

More information about the International Trust for Croatian Monuments, including ways of supporting its projects, can be found at [www.croatianmonuments.org](http://www.croatianmonuments.org).

**Jadranka, Lady Beresford-Peirse**

