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## Ivan Mestrovic Comes to Syracuse University

William P. Tolley  
*Syracuse University*

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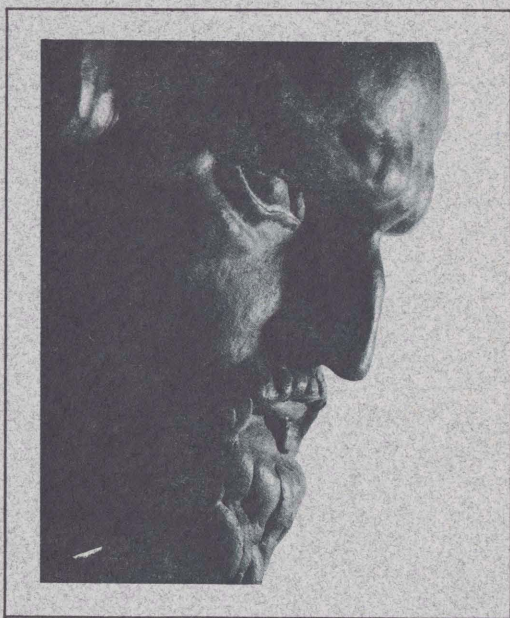
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C O U R I E R



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# Ivan Meštrović Comes to Syracuse University

BY WILLIAM P. TOLLEY

Ivan Meštrović has long been recognized as one of the leading sculptors of the twentieth century. Indeed, in his native land of Yugoslavia, where at least four museums are devoted to the display of his works, he is a national hero. His sculptures represent classical and religious values, but transcend traditional forms in the vigor of their conception. Their energy springs from a compassion nurtured by his own sacrifice, courage, and struggle. They are works of art in the truest sense, for they comprehend the paradox of human love and suffering and speak to us of things that endure.

In 1946 Meštrović was already an internationally acclaimed artist, though much better known in Europe, where he had exhibited widely and made his name as a dominating political figure in Yugoslavia's fight for freedom. The end of the war saw him destitute and ill, a refugee imprisoned in Germany. When the opportunity came to attract him to a professorship at Syracuse University, I was moved as much by the concern to rescue a great artist as by the desire to make an eminent addition to the faculty of the School of Art.

In offering him a faculty position, however, I transgressed every rule I had ever made about the procedure of faculty selection. Rules, they say, are made to be broken. Indeed, if the opportunity were offered me again, I hope I would have the courage to act as decisively as I did then.

It began with a visit Mrs. Tolley and I made to the Manhattan home of Thomas J. Watson, president of International Business Machines. We were houseguests of the Watsons for the better part of a week, and one morning they invited us to ride downtown with them to see a close friend of theirs, a sculptress who was executing a bust of Tom. The close friend, Malvina Hoffman, was an old friend of mine as well. I had in the past bought several sculptures from Malvina, and she had donated one or two to the University.



Ivan Meštrović, *Self-portrait*, c. 1911, Bronze. Syracuse University Art Collections (Photo: Steve Sartori).

However, when we arrived at Malvina's studio, it was immediately apparent that she was greatly preoccupied and distressed. As soon as we had a moment alone together, I asked her what was wrong.

"I'm deeply troubled", she said, "about a man, a sculptor under whom I once had the great privilege of studying. A Yugoslav, named Ivan Meštrović."

I assured her that I had heard of him. I told her I had seen and admired his two magnificent equestrian figures of American Indians in Chicago. I was also familiar with him from having read Malvina's marvelous book, *Heads and Tales* (New York: Scribner's, 1936), in which, I remembered, on page eighty-three, there was a photo of the oversize statue she herself had executed of Meštrović and which I had seen in the Brooklyn Museum of Art.

This brought a smile to her face. "You do read my books after all, don't you?"

She then began to tell me of the serious problem that was troubling her. "Ivan Meštrović was released from prison a few months ago



through the Pope's intervention. He's now in Italy. But he's had phlebitis, and pneumonia. He can't sell his work. He's in financial trouble. I recently received a very unhappy and depressing letter from him, and it has upset me very much. We must get him out of there.

"I've been to Columbia University to try to get him a faculty position there," she continued, "but they asked if he could teach history of art! Can you imagine? They don't need a sculptor, but they might use him to teach art history. He's a sculptor, Dr. Tolley," she said, "and he'd be miserable."

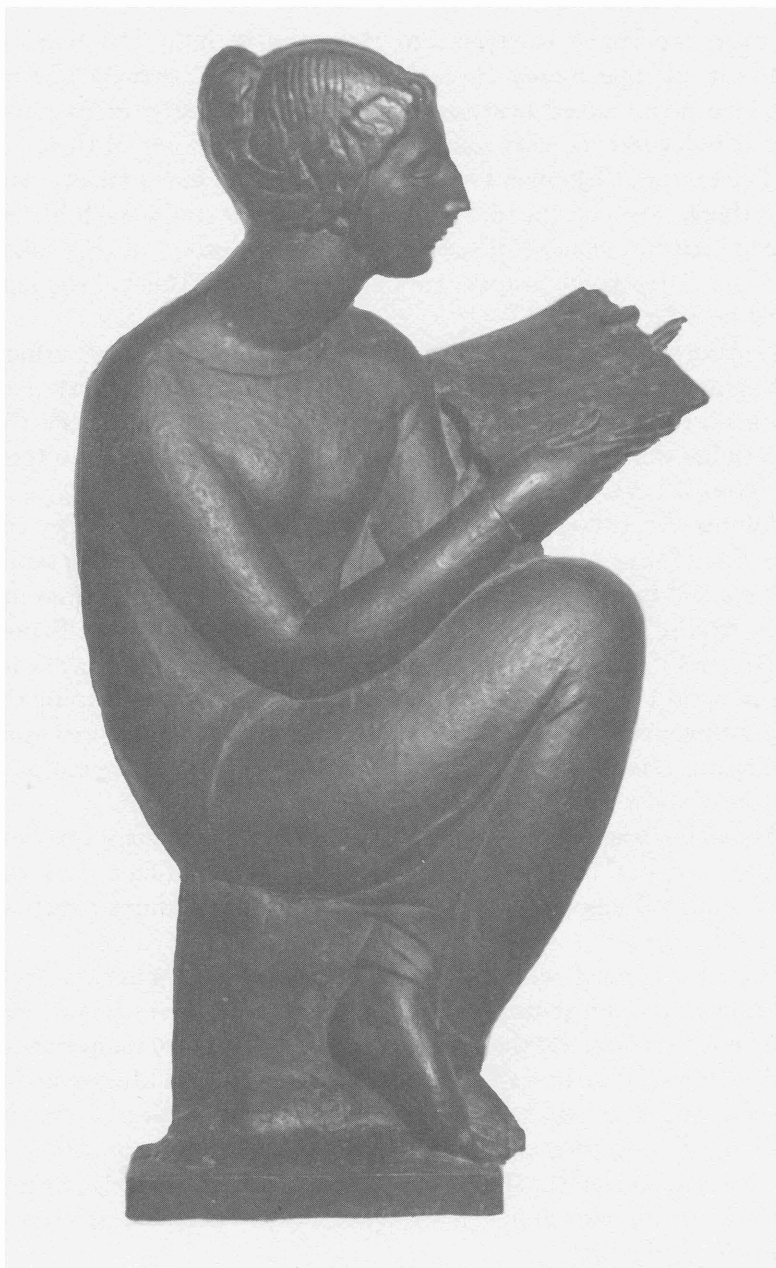
I reassured her that I understood, and then I proposed dictating a cablegram which she could send him in Rome. It said: "You have appointment as professor of sculpture at Syracuse University effective September this year. Will pay all expenses for you and family to come to States. Don't worry. Love, Malvina."

All this was, of course, very exhilarating, but when Mrs. Tolley and I returned home to Syracuse the following day, I came to my senses and realized that chancellors just don't and can't run universities this way. And so, by telephone calls to selected members of our School of Art and College of Fine Arts, I began to lay the groundwork for the reception of Ivan Meštrović on campus. From the beginning the response was enthusiastic. "He's a wonderful man", I was assured again and again. "He's a great teacher, perhaps our greatest living sculptor, and he'd make a wonderful colleague."

As can be imagined, I was vastly relieved by this ebullient reaction. Before long, L. C. Dillenback, Dean of the College of Fine Arts, was lending his full support, and the standard hiring procedures were back on track.

I then got in touch with a professor of the New School in New York, an eminent social scientist, whose special activity in these postwar years had been to arrange for the bringing over to this country refugee artists and scholars. I gave him all the information about Ivan Meštrović that I could, and also told him about two Yugoslavs in New York who had volunteered their aid. Generously, he agreed to help. When at last everything was put in order, Ivan Meštrović started his journey. He was on his way to teach and work as an artist-in-residence at Syracuse University.

When I look back, I can't help but feel that, broken rules notwithstanding, the opportunity to bring Ivan Meštrović here was a kind of miracle in itself.



Ivan Meštrović, *Portrait of a Lady*, n.d., Bronze.  
Syracuse University Art Collections (Photo: Steve Sartori).