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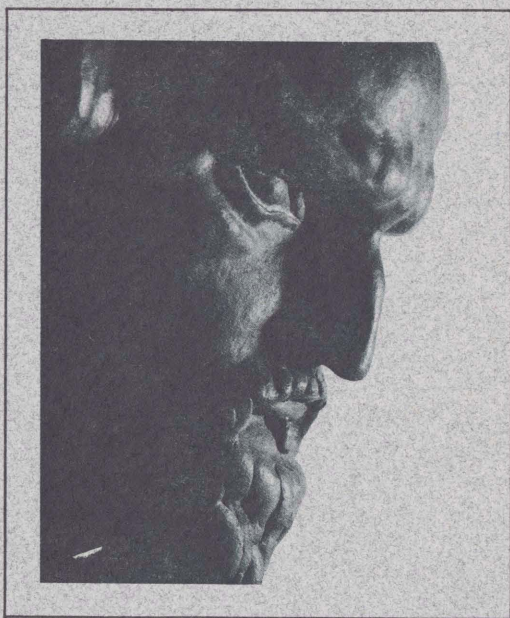
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# Ivan Meštrović

BY LAURENCE E. SCHMECKEBIER

*This article is an amalgamation of two pieces written by Professor Schmeckebier: "The Art of Meštrović", which prefaced the catalogue of the spring 1984 exhibition of Meštrović's work at The Joe and Emily Lowe Art Gallery at Syracuse University, and an as yet unpublished paper\* entitled "Meštrović as a Sculptor in America", which he gave at Columbia University in November 1982 at a seminar sponsored by The Institute on East Central Europe.*

*When Professor Schmeckebier was in Syracuse in April 1984 to give the inaugural address on Ivan Meštrović for The Lowe Gallery exhibition, he and I talked of his writing an article on Ivan Meštrović for the Courier. At that time, because of his health, he was hesitant to take on any heavy writing commitments. Later, however, he called me from his home in New Hampshire and mentioned these two pieces, which he thought he could rework in such a way as to be suitable for this journal. It was very kind of him indeed to be thinking of us during this period of his own declining health. He died the following month.*

*I have taken the liberty of piecing together the materials we talked about over the telephone and offer it now to our readers in the hope that they will find the contents, which are in essence entirely Professor Schmeckebier's, as interesting as did I.*

*The Editor*

Twenty years have gone by since the death of Ivan Meštrović, yet the significance of his life challenges us still. He stands among the great sculptors and patriots of the twentieth century and endures indeed—as Rodin described him seventy years ago—a “phenomenon”.

Born in Croatia in the remote mountain village of Vrpolje, Meštrović spent his childhood in Otavice in Dalmatian Croatia and was apprenticed to a stone mason, Pavle Bilinić, in Split (located in present-day

\*This paper will appear in its entirety in volume 24 of the *Journal of Croatian Studies*. The editor, Mr. K. J. Mirth, has very kindly agreed to this earlier publication in reduced form.

Yugoslavia). In 1899 he went to Vienna, became a student at the Academy of Fine Arts and, within a few years, began exhibiting with the progressive Vienna Secession Group. His first sales, in 1903 and 1904, enabled him to spend several years working in Paris and Rome.

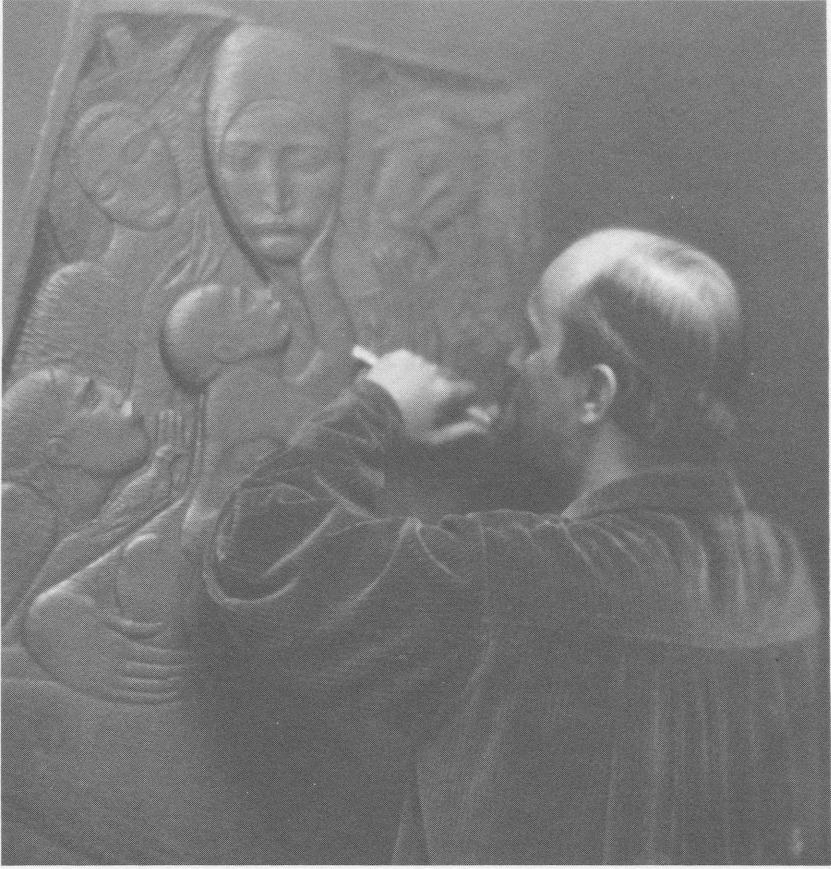
Meštrović's first recognition as a sculptor of international standing was at the 1909 exhibition, held by the Secession Group in Vienna, in which were shown some fifty of his works, mostly from the Kosovo monument project. The critical response was immediate and enthusiastic. The politicians were dismayed and accused Meštrović of trying to wage a personal propaganda campaign against the established authorities. The next year the exhibition was held in Zagreb with spectacular success, both as a tribute to a native artist and as an expression of national Croatian sentiment. Universal recognition of Meštrović the sculptor and of the national Yugoslav aspirations appeared again at the 1911 International Exhibition in Rome. So it was that the great exhibitions of his work, held during the tense years of World War I at the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1915 in London and again in Paris in 1919 at the time of the Versailles Peace Conference, played no small part in the establishment of Yugoslavia as an independent nation by attracting the attention of the world to its political and cultural entity. For a thirty-five-year-old sculptor from the mountains of Dalmatia, that was quite an achievement.

For Meštrović the twenty-year period between the two wars was crowded with amazing productivity and world-wide success. Though an ardent Yugoslav patriot, he refused to accept official, political leadership as did, for example, Paderewski in Poland.

The disaster of World War II and the invasion of Yugoslavia by German and Italian armies brought Meštrović's imprisonment, and then, through the intervention of the Vatican, his release and exile in Switzerland. During those years of frustration and despair, he produced the magnificent marble *Pietà* now in the Sacred Heart Church at the University of Notre Dame, and the bronze figures in *The Joe and Emily Lowe Art Gallery* at Syracuse University of *Job*, *St. Jerome*, and the *Suppliant Persephone*—each reflecting the anguish, suffering, and hope characteristic of that period.

His final period began in 1946 in the United States, first at Syracuse University and then, from 1955 until his death in 1962, at the University of Notre Dame. It was characterized by continued and rich productivity. He had a profound influence on young sculptors who were





Ivan Meštrović in his studio in Zagreb, 1924.  
(Photo: Clara Sipprell, from the Clara Sipprell Collection,  
George Arents Research Library)

attracted to him from all over the country. His work was presented in numerous major exhibitions, such as that at the Metropolitan Museum in New York in 1947, and he was recognized with honors of every description, from honorary degrees to awards from professional societies. He died in 1962 in South Bend, Indiana, of a heart attack.

There is a three-fold concept involved in Meštrović's works and in the man himself. The first is, as Meštrović once said, that "immortality lies with us". It is up to the individual to seek that immortality. From earliest childhood Meštrović knew that he would be a sculptor and,

through the more than seventy years of his incredibly productive career, he never lost sight of the idea that the hand releases the image. That belief was the second precept of Meštrović's philosophy. The third element, involving his inner spirit and his amazing capacity for work, was Meštrović's sense of mission. He saw art existing not only for its own sake, but as a service to mankind in some larger context.

The literature on Meštrović is vast, but it stems largely from the first half of this century. The significance of Meštrović, the sculptor and patriot, that I was able to present a generation ago<sup>1</sup> appears to be just as meaningful in these threatening years of the 1980s as during the revolutionary events of the war and post-war period. For the student of either era, this man towers as one of the great artistic personalities of the century. Not only did he have a major influence on the culture and politics of our time, but he remains the embodiment of an ideal in which the artist is conceived not as the Romantic individualist, sufficient only to himself, but as an integral part of society and responsible to the spiritual needs and welfare of mankind. Meštrović's career as an artist reveals an almost superhuman effort to achieve that ideal. In this he belongs in the realm of the greatest: Michelangelo, Bernini, Rodin.

To judge Meštrović the sculptor it is perhaps more useful to look at his work in terms of his contemporaries rather than of the artistic traditions and influences in which he was involved. His spectacular career in Europe from 1904 until 1946 is clear and established; his sixteen years as an artist in America were dramatic and frustrating. Both phases reveal an enigmatic quality.

From the beginning, Meštrović dealt with no small ideas, but great ones of stature and profound significance. In the spirit of the Paris Pantheon and the German Valhalla at Regensburg, he conceived the Kosovo monument as a national shrine and tribute to the heroic folk tradition of his native Croatia. Kosovo is a fifty-mile-long plain in southern Serbia, where, in 1389, the Serbian forces under Tsar Lazar were defeated by the Turks under Sultan Murad I. Through five hundred years of suppression and enslavement the memory of that tragic disaster was kept alive through ballads and folksongs sung by wandering minstrels—the *guslari*—praising the heroic exploits of Tsar Lazar,

1. Laurence E. Schmeckebier, *Ivan Meštrović: Sculptor and Patriot* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1959).

Kraljević Marko, Banović Strohinja, and the sorrowing mothers and maidens who suffered in the catastrophe.

Meštrović's temple of Kosovo was to be a massive octagonal central structure with smaller chapels on three sides and an impressive facade and atrium at its entrance. The interior was to contain gigantic figures of heroes, heroines, caryatids, sphinxes, and reliefs depicting scenes from popular legend. Thus Meštrović sought, as he once said, "to give a synthesis of the popular national ideals—to express the deeply rooted memory of the greatest moments of our history, forming, at the same time, a central place for hopes in the future, amidst nature and under the free sky. The defeat was not accepted by the Serbian people as its final fate but only as a punishment for generations . . . to prepare, by suffering, the way to a new freedom."

The monument building at Kosovo was never constructed, though the concept, seemingly unattainable because of political and economic circumstances, lived on vitally in Meštrović's mind as an idea and model. The sculptures he carved for it, literally with his own hands, are strong and invincible, retaining their power to this day. Let us compare these figures for Kosovo with what his contemporaries were doing in Vienna, France, and Germany: Kaufmann's *Vaterlandslied* (1903) and Metzner's *Niebelungen* fountain in Vienna (1904), Bourdelle's *Monument to the Dead* in Montauban (1902), Vigeland's unparalleled *History of Man* sculptures in Frogner Park, Oslo (1905) and the colossal "Battle of Nations" monument (1906-13) near Leipzig. These all were works which Meštrović certainly knew. While the ideas and motivation might be comparable to what was guiding Meštrović, and the scale equally gigantic, the figures themselves in those works were weak, mannered and, as sculptural forms, ineffective. Only Rodin, as seen in the richly expressive figures of his *Gates of Hell* (begun in 1880) and the dramatic *Citizens of Calais* (1884-86), was able to imbue the forms with the inner spirit and power of a great idea.

There were colossal single figures in the tradition of the classic Athena Parthenos, all with their political and national associations: Ludwig von Schuvanthaler's *Bavaria* in Munich (1843-93), Johannes Schilling's *Germania* (Niederwalddenkmal, overlooking the Rhine, 1883) and of course our own *Statue of Liberty* in New York harbor (Bartholdi, 1886). Meštrović certainly knew them and I am sure was not impressed. His answer is to be seen in his own work: the 1928 *Victory Monument* in Kalemegdan Park in Belgrade: and before *Diocletian's Palace* in Split,



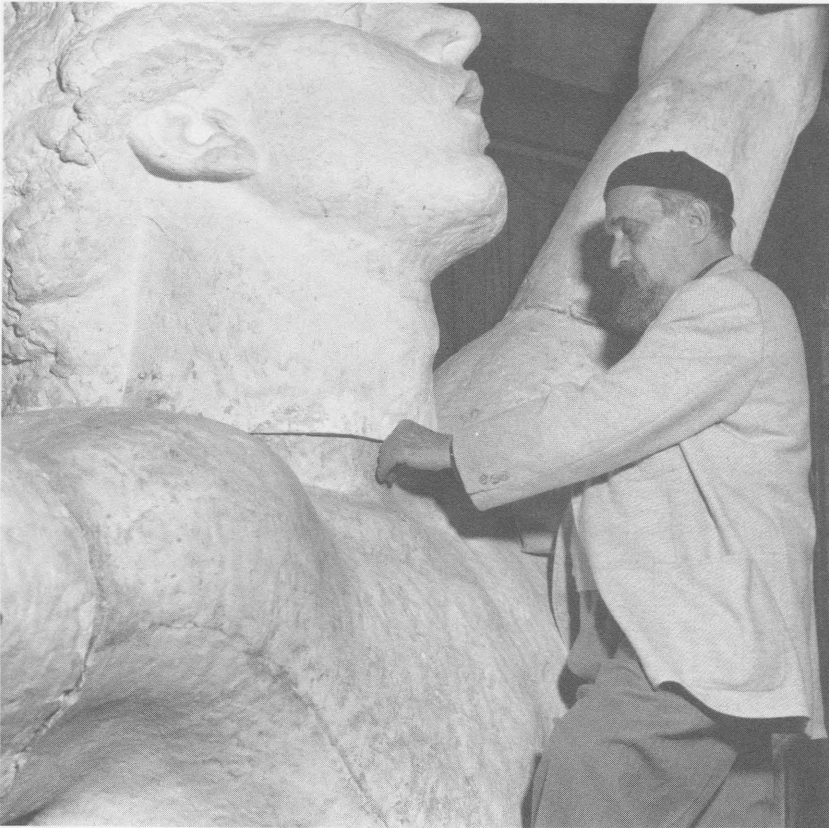
the magnificent bronze (twenty-six feet high) monument to Gregory of Nin, the tenth-century bishop who defended the right of the Croats to use their native Slavic language in Roman Catholic churches.

Meštrović arrived in America in 1946. Following the miseries of war and exile, ill health, and frustration, he was received in this country with honor and acclaim, great publicity, and an unprecedented retrospective exhibition at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art. While there was much talk about commissions and teaching positions for the distinguished refugee, it was Chancellor William P. Tolley and Syracuse University who took him in. Once arrived, however, the situation for Meštrović was anything but ideal. Funds were limited, work facilities inadequate, students ill-prepared to think and work on the monumental and serious scale of such a master. Universities, in general, at that time were not ready to assume the responsibilities of patronage and practical support of the artist.

Whether it was the genius of the artist, the sculptor's capacity for hard work, or the simple faith of the Croatian peasant which he always maintained, Meštrović nevertheless managed to work his way through to a solution which, while tragic in many ways, still remains a source of inspiration and satisfaction.

This was his own personal achievement, not society's or the patron's, the church's, or the government's. In some ways, perhaps one could claim that it was the university which made Meštrović the sculptor in America possible, but at both Syracuse University and the University of Notre Dame the transformation was a slow and hard-earned one. The idea of an "artist in residence"—in the one case to provide inspiration for aspiring young artists, in the other to teach religious art of the church—was hopeful, but naive, and became effective only through years of patient and creative effort. Today, twenty years after his death, the two centers of Meštrović influence and the greatest collections of his work in America are located at Syracuse and Notre Dame Universities.

To clarify Meštrović's historical position as a sculptor in America, one might again compare him and his point of view with that of his contemporaries here. He knew about our great national monuments. What his reaction was when he saw them has never been recorded. With his background he was certainly sympathetic to the ideas and motivation of the Statue of Liberty, but its sculptural form he would certainly have viewed as empty and lifeless. In the nation's capital there



Ivan Meštrović with plaster model of *Man and Freedom*  
for the Mayo Clinic, Rochester, Minn.

were the famous monuments to our national heroes: the Washington obelisk, and the Lincoln and Jefferson memorials. Big and impressive as they are, with their superb and elegant materials and beautiful park settings, he would have undoubtedly considered them little more than overblown cemetery monuments.

During those years there was much publicity about Gutzon Borglum's gargantuan Mount Rushmore Memorial in the Black Hills of South Dakota. Billed as "The Shrine of Democracy" and the "World's Greatest Sculptural Work", it comprised the serene portrait-busts of America's greatest heroes on a scale unprecedented in the history of mankind. (The sixty-foot heads are proportionate to men 465 feet high.) What a magnificent idea: to carve a mountain of gleaming ageless granite

into heroic figures as a shrine for the edification of future civilizations. Michelangelo and his patron Pope Julius II were inspired by that kind of idea. So had Meštrović been in his Kosovo project.

But what was the result? As one drives along the winding, picturesque highway leading to Mount Rushmore, one discovers the figures as part of a relief carved *into* the mountain, rather than conceptual elements released from the total form of the mountain. In spite of their tremendous size, the busts have the essential character of old-fashioned saloon or mantel-piece sculpture. This concept of releasing figures from the confinement of rock was what Meštrović had in mind when he heard Bourdelle's boast that he, Bourdelle, was the one who executed most of Rodin's late sculpture while he was working in the master's studio as assistant. "Ha!" said Meštrović, "You should tell that to a sculptor!"

The other basic factor in the understanding of Meštrović in America is that by the time he arrived here the general trend in contemporary art had moved overwhelmingly toward the modern point of view in the United States, as it had in Europe. By this is meant not only the interest in abstract art, but the basic emphasis on the artist's means of expression—his constant search and experimentation with new forms, new materials, and new techniques. The artist is not beholden to patron, church, or government, but only to himself and the spiritual drive for expression which he incorporates. For an extreme example of the embodiment of this popular current attitude, one thinks of Christo's Valley Curtain project in Rifle, Colorado<sup>2</sup> and his Running Fence in California,<sup>3</sup> of which one of the workers involved in its erection exclaimed, "It's beautiful! No one ever thought of an idea like that before."

Meštrović seldom criticized abstract artists or the modern point of view. He had always gone his own way and for fifty years had remained far ahead of his time. For him art was a means to an end, not an end in itself. In post-war America there were indeed monumental projects under way—the works of Alexander Calder, Henry Moore, Jacques Lipschitz, Pablo Picasso, Jean Dubuffet—many of them gigantic structures fabricated by industrial means on the basis of small models

2. This gigantic red curtain was stretched across a mountain valley, at a cost of \$800,000, with no other purpose than to prove it could be done.

3. The Running Fence consisted of twenty-four miles of white plastic fabric, which was strung on a twelve-foot structure from the mountains north of San Francisco down into the sea.

or maquettes. The only comment I ever heard which might reflect Meštrović's attitude on these matters was in response to my enthusiastic description of a large, primordial, reclining figure by Henry Moore. He looked at me, put his hand on my shoulder, and shook his head as he smiled. "Mr. Schmeckebeier, when an Englishman goes crazy, he's really crazy."

For the new world of the postwar era, Meštrović's most positive statement appeared in the various studies for a projected monument to the six million Jews who perished in the Holocaust. From his own background of heroic tragedy which we have followed from Kosovo to the studies for Job done while languishing in prison, he conceived a gigantic figure of Moses striding forward as leader pointing the way of the future, against a vast panorama of migrating peoples in relief. After years of Meštrović's hard work in the old studio-barn at Syracuse, fund-raising for the completion of the project began to fail and the full-scale, finished model of Moses was put in storage, until the centenary exhibition at The Joe and Emily Lowe Gallery last spring.

Today, as we look back on the years of Meštrović's career in America, we could admit that perhaps he was one of those who, like Thomas Mann, were "survivors from a nobler era", that the New World and the revolutionary culture of the latter part of the twentieth century have no use for the ideas and accomplishment of Meštrović, the Phenomenon. Yet, look again. The political and social tensions of this century are still with us, changed in detail, but expanded into global proportions. In such a world the peasant stonemason from the granite mountains of Croatia still has a message. It is the artist's doctrine of hard work, great ideas, and the dream of salvation through love and sacrifice. The story is told both in his writings and in his life as a political activist. As one of the great sculptors of the twentieth century, Meštrović will speak to generations yet to be born: of respect for the Old Masters which, for him, meant Rodin, Michelangelo, Phidias and the anonymous sculptors of the medieval cathedrals; of faith in nature, which for him meant the human figure; and of work—endless and consistent work. For Meštrović, work was a daily habit, begun in his earliest years as a stonemason with his father and continued throughout his life. He was in fact at work in his studio on the morning of the day he died.

While most of his contemporary artists, beginning with Rodin's immediate followers, were concerned with the problems of form and

technique, the search for new values and modes of expression, Meštrović sought to express the deeply-rooted memory of life's greatest moments. In our day, in a society that is shaken and confused, in need of courage, strength and direction, this is still the message. It is one of spiritual content rather than obsession with technical means. It is one of deep and inner truth, humanitarian compassion as well as heroic achievement. At Syracuse University we honor this great artist who, as Chancellor William P. Tolley said, "dreamed no small dreams".