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## Ivan Mestrovic: The Current State of Criticism

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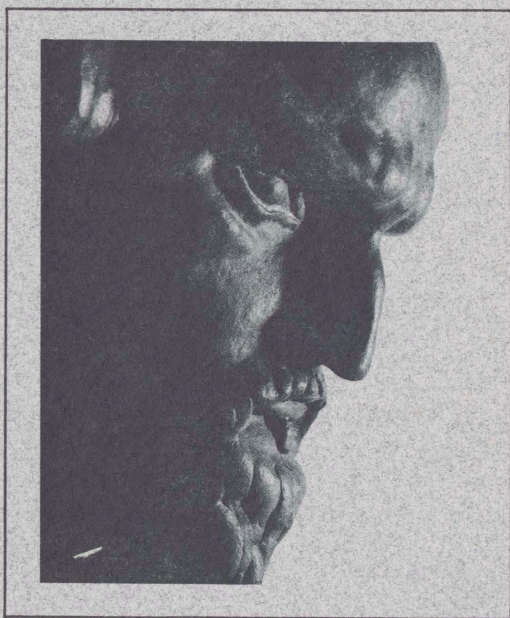
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# Ivan Meštrović: The Current State of Criticism

BY DEAN A. PORTER

Few artists have had careers as long and prolific as Ivan Meštrović's, and even fewer have known as much success and recognition. It would require volumes of print to document completely and properly, to discuss, and to evaluate the quality and scope of his sculptural, architectural, and literary accomplishments, and then additional volumes to duplicate the many monographs, essays, and articles that have been written about him. A brief mention of these accomplishments and a short review of the art-historical and critical comments on them will provide us with a point of reference from which to consider his position, as it is perceived today, in the world of modern art.

During the first ten years of his career, Meštrović completed over 175 works of art. Among these are: the elaborate model for his ambitious Kosovo project and dozens of magnificent sculptures of heroes, widows, children, and caryatids for its decoration; *The Well of Life* and *The Spring of Life* that were commissioned to be cast in bronze by the Austrian industrialist Karl Wittgenstein for his home; *The Victor* sculpture for the "Victory Monument" in Kalamegdan Park, Belgrade; and numerous portraits and religious pieces. Exhibitions of these works held in major cities throughout Europe brought the artist immediate recognition. *Die Kunst*, the review of the 1906 Vienna Secessionist exhibition which included a number of Meštrović's sculptures, featured a plaster of *The Well of Life* and referred to its author as "an already established young sculptor".<sup>1</sup> Some fifty years later, George A. Cevasco wrote in his "The Legend of Ivan Meštrović" that "his work was universally acclaimed as ranking with the greatest the world had ever seen when he was only thirty".<sup>2</sup>

1. Karl M. Kuzmany, "Die Frühjahr-Ausstellung der Wiener Sezession", *Die Kunst für Alle* 21 (June 1906).

2. George A. Cevasco, "The Legend of Ivan Meštrović", *American Artist* 23 (April 1959): 34.

“The greatest phenomenon among the sculptors [of his time]—Auguste Rodin’s reference to Meštrović during these early years—was often used by art historians and critics in their comments on the artist.<sup>3</sup> After seeing his work in the Vienna Secessionist show of 1909, both the Viennese critic Arthur Roessler and historian Josef Strzygowski classified the artist as a “phenomenon”.<sup>4</sup>

Meštrović’s international reputation was firmly established in 1911 at the annual International Exhibition at Rome, where he exhibited over fifty works, primarily Kosovo sculptures, and was awarded first prize for the *Kraljević Marko* equestrian sculpture. In 1914, Charles Aitken observed in an article for *The Burlington Magazine*: Meštrović’s amazing genius was the chief revelation of the Rome Exhibition in 1911 . . . It was at once obvious . . . that a new planet had swum into the artistic heavens.”<sup>5</sup> This critic felt that “the soul spoke out in these sculptures as well as the mind. The technique was masterful, but not conspicuous, and cleverness had disappeared before stark strength and unselfconscious conviction.”<sup>6</sup>

In 1915 Meštrović was honored with a one-man exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, the first such show ever held by the museum for an artist within his lifetime. James Bone, the English critic, prepared an essay for the catalogue, in which he wrote: “Ivan Meštrović’s genius was a phenomenon that burst upon Europe at the International Exhibition in Rome in 1911”<sup>7</sup>; and about the exhibition itself: “In these sculptures, Meštrović delivers his testaments; [his work] has the daemonic urgency of archaic art and of the entranced singlemindedness of the Italian primitives. There is nothing between you and what he has to say; his message is delivered with the immediacy of Fra Angelico. . . . Its beauty comes like the beauty of flames, which is fire itself.”<sup>8</sup>

While art critics and historians were, in general, positive in their reactions to Meštrović during these early years, the few who were not appear to have been less concerned with his artistic abilities than with

3. Milan Curcin, *Ivan Meštrović, A Monograph* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1919), 83.

4. Arthur Roessler, “Ivan Meštrović”, *Deutsche Kunst und Decoration* 9 (1910): 143-164.

5. Charles Aitkin, “Ivan Meštrović”, *The Burlington Magazine* 26 (March 1915): 260.

6. Aitkin, “Meštrović”.

7. James Bone, “Meštrović and His Art”, *Exhibition of the Works of Ivan Meštrović* (London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 1915).

8. Bone, “Meštrović”.

the content of his work. Some felt that Meštrović's sculptures were too politically motivated, while others thought his work could be understood and appreciated only from a historical point of view.

Perhaps the most revealing comment was the one made by his peer, Egon Schiele, in a letter to Arthur Roessler in 1910: "Why can't there be a large international exhibition in the Künstlerhaus. I've said this to Klimt. For example, each artist has a room to himself—Rodin, Van Gogh, Gauguin, Minne . . . Klimt, Toorop, Stuck, Liebermann, Slevogt, Corinth, Meštrović, etc. Only painting and sculpture. What a sensation for Vienna!"<sup>9</sup> In addition to documenting Meštrović's involvement with the Vienna Secessionists at that time, Schiele's words suggest his own high regard for the sculptor.

The enthusiasm for Meštrović's work reflected by these critical excerpts persisted throughout the 1910s and the 1920s as the artist continued to exhibit his work extensively throughout Europe and America. One-man shows—as in the Brooklyn Museum in 1924; The Art Institute of Chicago, The Albright Museum in Buffalo, and The Detroit Institute of Arts, in 1925; and in the museums of Montreal and Toronto in 1927—are particularly worth noting.

Though scholarly attention and, to some degree, public interest in Meštrović waned between the two world wars (particularly as the great scholars migrated from Europe to America), the artist did continue to exhibit periodically and to be recognized as long as he lived. He was given a one-man show at the Metropolitan Museum in 1947, the only one-man show ever given by the Metropolitan for a living artist. In his review of the exhibition, Alonzo Lansford wrote, "It is singularly significant that [Meštrović] is almost unanimously revered by American sculptors of all schools as one of the greatest living sculptors. The current exhibition . . . does not negate this reputation."<sup>10</sup> Edward A. Jewell, who wrote a feature article for *The New York Times* on the retrospective character of the show, noted that "the work . . . certainly leaves in no doubt his power and originality."<sup>11</sup> Several universities granted him honorary degrees during the fifties and many organizations and associations honored him with awards and medals.

9. Christian von Nebehay, *Egon Schiele: 1890-1918 Leben, Briefe, Gedichte, "Documents und Korrespondenz 1910"*, no. 144 (Salzburg and Vienna: Residenz Verlag, 1979), 139.

10. Alonzo Lansford, "Meštrović, Living Sculptor, Honored by Met", *Art Digest* 21 (15 April 1947): 17.

11. Edward A. Jewell, *The New York Times*, 6 April 1947.

At the end of the decade, three years before Meštrović died, George A. Cevasco wrote that “few contemporary sculptors can ever hope to receive the adulation that has been heaped upon Ivan Meštrović. Ivan Meštrović has become a legend.”<sup>12</sup> He concluded, “In a life of artistic creation that finds few parallels in our day, his work speaks for itself.”<sup>13</sup>

During the centennial year of Meštrović’s birth in 1983, major exhibitions—both retrospective in character and comprehensive in scope—were held in Croatia and the United States (fig. 1). The Croatian exhibition concentrated on the works that Meštrović had done before his exile from his homeland in 1940, while the three exhibitions in the United States were devoted to the works done between 1940 and 1962, the year of his death. Unfortunately, an exchange of sculpture pieces was impossible because of a lack of funding. However, films, photographs, catalogues, and biographic materials were generously exchanged and, in our own particular case, have been most helpful for our understanding Meštrović and his art.

The Croatian exhibition, appropriately held in the ancient converted Jesuit monastery, the Muzejski prostor, in Zagreb, was composed of eighty-eight pieces of sculpture and relief in stone, bronze, wood, and plaster, and more than one hundred drawings from the museums and galleries in Belgrade, Drniš, Dubrovnik, Split, and Zagreb. The collection represented the artist’s finest works. For the first time in many years, the public was given the opportunity to view in one location Meštrović’s sculptured masterpieces. As a result, critics and art historians were stimulated to reconsider and reevaluate Meštrović and his work, a need that museums have for years felt is long overdue.

The exhibition catalogue, written by Duško Kečkemet and produced by the Muzejski Prostor, has proven to be an important contribution to Meštrović studies. Sophisticated in appearance and refreshing in content, it offers new insights into the artist’s work.

Kečkemet’s analysis of Meštrović’s work was intelligent and honest. He wrote: “The value and greatness of Meštrović’s art lay always, to a greater or lesser extent, in the happy combination of content and form, of the idea and the form he gave to that idea. When content prevailed over form, Meštrović became entrapped in empty rhetoric; when he was governed exclusively by his artistic feelings, he was more

12. Cevasco, “Legend”, 34.

13. Cevasco, “Legend”, 97.

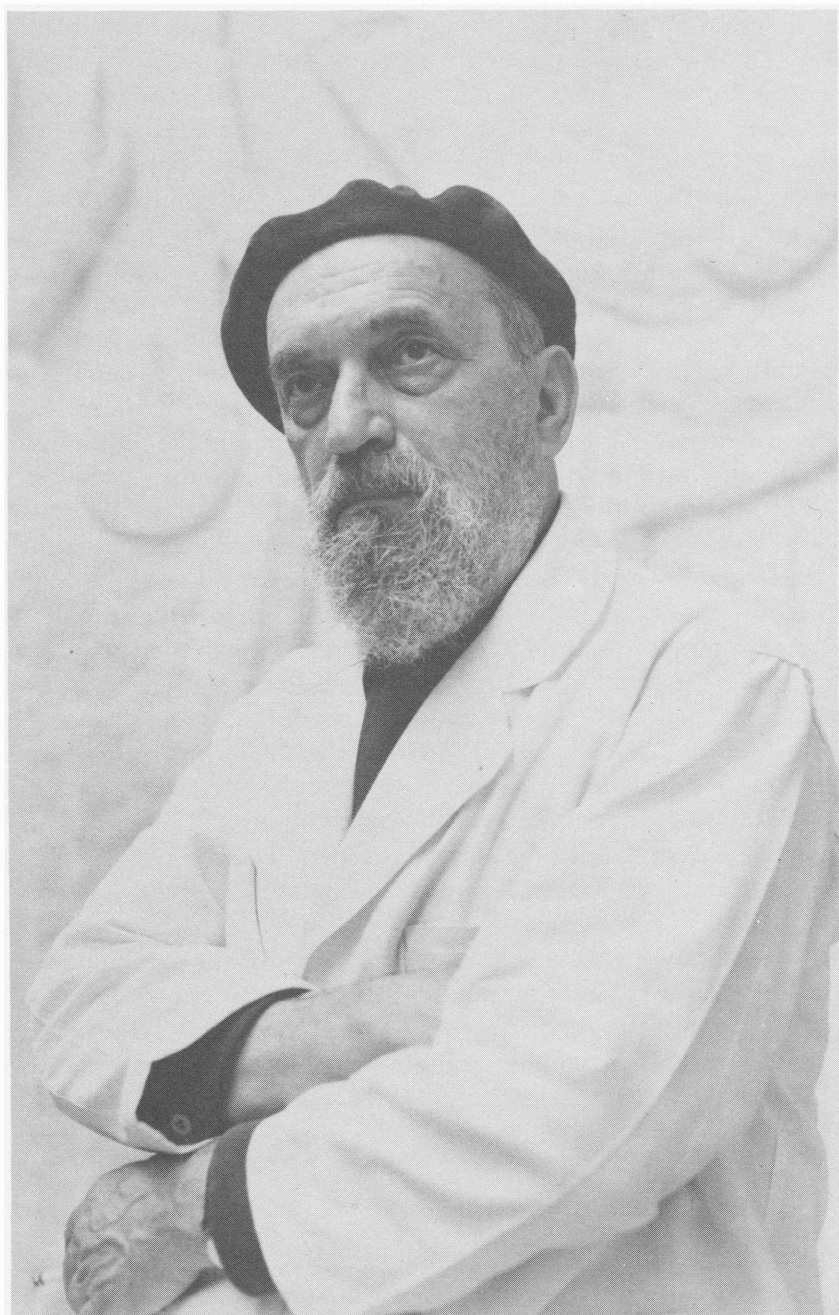


Fig. 1. Ivan Meštrović at Notre Dame (Photo: Bruce Harlan).



an excellent master than a distinctive artist.”<sup>14</sup> Kečkemet noted that Meštrović’s attitude toward art changed after 1915, that his art began to suggest a deeper concern for the sociological, political, and economic changes that were occurring in Europe than it did for the changes taking place in artistic circles. In his search for stylistic inspiration, the artist had turned away from contemporary influences and had looked back to the antique and Renaissance masters.<sup>15</sup> It is possible that this change in his approach to art lessened the critics’ interest in his work.

Kečkemet also discusses Meštrović’s affiliation with the Vienna Secessionists during the first part of the century. It is significant and especially interesting for Meštrović scholars that he did so,<sup>16</sup> for not enough is known, unfortunately, about this aspect of the artist’s career. Art historians today, particularly those who concentrate on the Secessionist movement, have somehow failed to identify him with the movement.

The Museum of Arts and Sciences at Baton Rouge, The Lowe Art Gallery at Syracuse University, and The Snite Museum of Art at the University of Notre Dame were responsible for the centennial exhibitions that were presented in the United States. The staffs collaborated with each other to produce three meaningful and inspiring shows. Each institution selected for its particular exhibit works from its own permanent collection of the master’s sculptures and presented them with sixty Meštrović drawings from the Meštrović family’s private collection. In 1941 Meštrović himself had wrapped the drawings in packets for storage, where they remained until the summer of 1982, when his daughter, Maritza, unwrapped them and permitted the University of Notre Dame to select, organize, and circulate them for the exhibitions.<sup>17</sup>

A catalogue of these drawings was prepared for the exhibition by the Rev. James F. Flanigan, C.S.C. and me. To my knowledge, it is the first of its kind, in that it focused on the drawings rather than the sculptures and emphasized the relationship of drawings to sculptures. In it the drawings are treated as the primary materials and

14. Duško Kečkemet, *Ivan Meštrović 1883-1962: Centennial Exhibition*, Oct. 6, 1983-Feb. 6, 1984 (Zagreb: Muzejski Prostor, 1984), 11.

15. Kečkemet, *Meštrović*.

16. Kečkemet, *Meštrović*.

17. Meštrović, before leaving Split in 1941, wrapped several packages of drawings. Half of the drawings were given to the Meštrović Gallery in Split, while the family retained approximately 240. It was from this group of drawings, called the Meštrović Family Collection, that the traveling exhibition was organized.



Fig. 2. Ivan Meštrović, Study for the *Pietà*, from the Collection of the Congregation of Holy Cross, University of Notre Dame.

not supplemental as in previous publications about Meštrović's works (fig.2).

In the past, studies of Meštrović have been limited to fragments of information by the unavailability of these drawings, which date back to 1904. Now, however, with their discovery and their publication, scholars will be able to approach his work with renewed energy. The preliminary, brief examinations that have been made of the drawings have already cast new light on Meštrović's original intentions for certain sculptures and his methods of working.

As Flanigan remarks in his critical analysis of the drawings, "Meštrović seldom drew without a purpose in mind."<sup>18</sup> It is apparent that the drawings were executed for various reasons. Some are drawings from life, academic in their feeling; some are quick, spontaneous sketches, probably notations for some future work; others appear to have been prepared for a developing project. There are drawings probably taken from finished sculptures, and drawings that are independent of his known works—undoubtedly designed for exhibition purposes. Scholars who are now beginning to study Meštrović as a draughtsman will be able to use the catalogue as a guide in order to develop chronologies of the artist's extant drawings based on the stylistic elements of the drawings and the sculptures that are dated.

The research that was done for the catalogue is in the process of being expanded by Notre Dame scholars who expect to publish a complete and comprehensive study of 200 of Meštrović's most important drawings. It is hoped that this research will uncover additional facts about those projects which Meštrović planned and worked on but which he never completed, notably the Kossovo Temple, the "Victory Monument", the monument to Petar Petrović Njegoš on Mt. Lovćen, and the Jewish Memorial for Riverside Drive in New York City. An analysis of the drawings should bring about a better appreciation of the complexity of these projects and the genius behind them.

Some of the drawings appear to relate to sculptures that are unknown and, we hope, extant. Several sculptures, some in stone and others in plaster, were discovered during the centennial year and were exhibited. They had been purchased over the years from the artist by private collectors from all parts of the world and had not been seen publicly for forty or fifty years. We hope that more of them will sur-

18. Rev. James F. Flanigan, C.S.C., "Introduction", *Ivan Meštrović 1883-1962, A Centennial Exhibition: A Survey of Drawings and Prints Primarily from the Meštrović Family Collection* (South Bend, Ind.: The Snite Museum of Art, University of Notre Dame, 1983), 9.



Fig.3. Petar Petrović Njegoš, ca. 1957-1958, over life-sized plaster  
(Photo: Meštrović Archives, University of Notre Dame).

face as a result of the interest that has been generated in Meštrović by the recent exhibitions and conferences.

The sculptures in plaster on display at the exhibitions were especially worth noting. Like the drawings, they have stimulated much interest in their creator. While those plasters that have been cast in bronze have been studied and commentary about many of them published, a great number (both in Croatia and in the United States) have never been critically considered. Furthermore, many of the plasters that were thrown by the artist after he came to this country have never been cast.

The plasters can be separated into three categories. The first consists of plasters that were prepared to serve as guides, or maquettes, for larger stone or bronze pieces. An example of this type can be seen in the plaster of Petar Petrović Njegoš that is now in the estate of Mrs. Ivan Meštrović (fig. 3). When it was to be translated into stone in 1958,



Fig. 4. *Moses for the Jewish Memorial*, ca. 1950, twelve-foot plaster. From the Syracuse University Art Collections (Photo: Steve Sartori).

Meštrović was seventy-five years old and physically unable to work the stone himself. He prepared a plaster maquette and an over life-sized plaster and shipped them to Split to a former associate, who executed the carving in granite.

The second category includes plasters that Meštrović prepared for casting. They are traditional in that they were sized to the measurements of the bronze castings for which they were intended. However, as mentioned previously, many of these plasters never found their way to the foundry.

Perhaps the most exciting discovery among the uncast plasters exhibited in 1983 was the twelve-foot-high plaster sculpture of Moses that Meštrović prepared for the Jewish Memorial project (fig. 4). It had

been stored in three crates and left at Syracuse University when Meštrović moved to the University of Notre Dame in 1955. According to Laurence Schmeckebier the monumental Moses was never cast because of bureaucratic red tape.<sup>19</sup> Plaster maquettes for the entire Jewish Memorial project—several studies in plaster other than the one of Moses, a full-scale upper torso in bronze, and numerous drawings—remain as evidence of the tremendous amount of time and effort the artist devoted to the project before it was cancelled. Only when all of this preparatory material is properly examined and analyzed will we be able to appreciate Meštrović's commitment to this memorial and his strength as an artist in the 1950s. Had he been able to realize his plans, we may well have considered the project his most ambitious in North America. Only the Grant Park Indians, done in 1926, may have been comparable.

Meštrović's third use of plaster was for the purpose of making reproductions. He made copies of a number of his wood reliefs and marble sculptures in-the-round. While we cannot know for certain Meštrović's reasons for creating reproduction plasters, we can offer some suggestions. Plasters, for instance, may have provided him with valuable three-dimensional records of his work. The extensive collection of plasters now in the Glyptotheca in Zagreb may have served such a purpose. It is also conceivable that he thought of multiple plasters in terms of making "editions", a practice not uncommon in the production of bronzes to be sold in quantities, for Meštrović was well aware of his status and importance as a Croatian artist. Visits to the various Meštrović museums in Croatia, Vrpolje, Drniš, Zagreb, and Split often prove startling when one is first confronted with a group of plaster images all exactly alike. Certainly, much can be learned about their creator from a study of them.

The present research that is being done on Meštrović is most encouraging. There are a number of scholars who are working on various aspects of his life and artistic career. Joseph O'Connor, professor of history at Wittenberg College in Ohio, is studying the relationship between Meštrović's politics and his art. In many respects, he is continuing with the work that Professor Schmeckebier pioneered. Michael Mulnix, assistant to the chancellor at the University of Alaska, has chosen for his master's degree thesis topic in journalism "Meštrović

19. Laurence Schmeckebier, symposium on Meštrović, Columbia University, New York, 4 November 1982.

the Man”, for which he will concentrate on the non-artistic aspects of the sculptor’s life. Professor Ante Kadić of the department of Slavic studies at Indiana University in Bloomington is studying the large corpus of literature that was written by Meštrović during his lifetime. Maritza Meštrović plans to publish a new biography of her father in the near future. In addition to the work being done in this country, the proceedings of the Meštrović symposium held in Zagreb are scheduled to be published in the *Annals of the Yugoslav Academy of Arts and Sciences*.<sup>20</sup>

Meštrović continues to be acclaimed one of the most interesting and dynamic artists of the century. While the research that is underway about some areas of his career has already begun to provide new insights, there are, as I have said before, other aspects of his life and work that need to be explored if we are fully to understand the man and appreciate his work. It is necessary to know more about the drawings and plaster sculptures. His involvement with the Vienna Secessionists during the early part of the century and the effects of the “independent” attitude he assumed afterwards are crucial to any study of his career. Meštrović was much more deeply involved with the Secessionists than has generally been thought by art historians. As I have noted in another article,<sup>21</sup> he was not merely an artist on the outside looking in on that movement, but an integral part of it. Finally, and perhaps of even greater importance, it is necessary for us to understand better the effect of Meštrović on twentieth-century sculpture. Facts brought to light by research in these areas will, I believe, encourage art historians to reevaluate the artist’s work and to determine more exactly his position in modern art.<sup>22</sup>

20. Telephone conversation with Joseph O’Connor, 24 September 1984.

21. To appear in the forthcoming issue of *Journal of Croatian Studies*.

22. I am indebted to Mrs. Sarah Coffman, Meštrović Archivist, University of Notre Dame, who has assisted me with the preparation of this manuscript.