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Icons and Croatian Painting in the Early 20th Century

In this paper the Byzantine and Creto-Venetian icons will be presented as an important source of inspiration in Croatian painting in the early 20th century. The author places that phenomenon within the context of European primitivism, a tendency of searching for inspiration in tribal, folk and medieval art in order to find an authentic, primordial expression. Intuitively recognising the spiritual dimension of icons some Croatian artists such as Jerolim Miše, Maksimilijan Vanka, Jozo Kljaković and Ljubo Babić used a number of Byzantine elements in some of their paintings, such as the flatness and linearity of design, hieratic posture and the flawless symmetrical frontality of a displayed character, the intense gaze directed at the observer, the golden background and the halo of light around the head. At the same time Ijko Gorenčević emphasised the connections and the similarities between the old icon art and the contemporary Expressionism, and Jerolim Miše recommended Russian and Byzantine art as a source of inspiration, for its deep spiritual insight. Kosta Strajnić explained this trend as an interest in other Slavic cultures, directed towards the creation of a new South Slavic culture in the period before the formation of a new Yugoslav state in 1918.