

## FROM HARD WORK TO RESISTANCE: CENTRALITY OF THE IMAGE OF HANDS IN THE ARTWORKS OF SLOVENIAN REGIONALIST PAINTER IVE ŠUBIC

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**Abstract:** The article explains the aesthetic element of the hand in the artworks of Slovenian regionalist painter Ive Šubic (1922–1989). It elaborates the reasons why the author believes that Šubic's work was a unique combination of regionalism and partisan art. During his professional life, after he participated in the partisan uprising against occupational forces in WW II, Šubic was considered a genuine partisan painter. He was highly praised by the Communist establishment, and he received several prestige awards. However, after the middle of the 1950s, when he slowly and quietly withdrew from the public life, he gradually became nostalgic. The hands on his paintings and public murals, portrayed as overworked hands with thick fingers and knuckles affected by hard farm work, are the central link between Šubic's experiences of war and his perception of the once genuine experience of rural life in Poljane Valley, lost for good.

**Key words:** hands, hard work, partisan resistance, regionalism, paintings

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*A painter is acknowledged by the hands.*

Ive Šubic

## 1. Introduction

It is difficult to say, which is the most appealing element of Ive Šubic's art. His paintings, murals, and illustrations are well known among Slovenian artists, art scholars and collectors for the distinctive reflexions of heartiness, faith in human progress and most surprisingly, nostalgic return to the past. But there is an element included in almost all his figurative art paintings which immediately catches one's attention – the representation of human hands. In his paintings *Baba Petra* (Old Woman Petra; Figure 1), *Zimska balada* (Winter Ballad), *Masora* (Masora), *Dražgoška pieta* (Dražgoše Pieta; Figure 2), *Kmet* (The Farmer; Figure 3), *Mož s kruhom* (The Men with the Bread), *Kolona* (Column; Figure 4) and many more, the hands of the portrayed persons are particularly exposed.

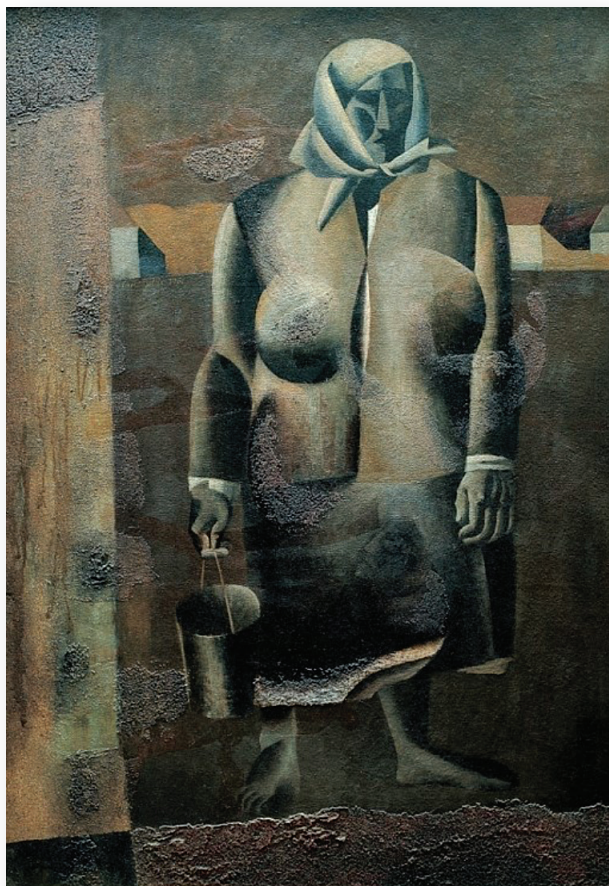


Figure 1. *Baba Petra* / *Old Woman Petra*, 1962.  
Oil on canvas, 87 x 67 cm. Private collection.

As the fifth generation of painters and carvers from Poljane Valley, Šubic was extremely prolific and his legacy is immense and wide. He was born in 1922 in a small Slovenian village in Poljane Valley, which was at the time part of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. His father was a local miller, his mother a kind-hearted housewife. Šubic, then a young boy, attracted the attention of a distinguished Slovenian painter Srečko Magulič, who met him during his holidays in Poljane. Magulič convinced the artist's parents to send him to the Arts and Crafts School in Ljubljana and later to the Academy of Fine Arts in Zagreb in 1940. When Germany invaded the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, Šubic was forced to return home. Soon after he joined the Yugoslav partisan liberation movement. At first, he was fighting against German Wehrmacht as a private soldier, but after a couple of months, he was transferred to the partisan printing shop Urška, where he took part in the production of partisan propaganda, youth periodicals and magazines.<sup>1</sup> Many Slovenian painters and artists joined the partisan liberation movement and some of them worked in the same printing shop as Šubic, so he had an excellent opportunity to work with many excellent and already distinguished elder colleagues. This informal education was later addressed as *The Partisan University*. After the war, Šubic finished his formal education at the newly established *Academy of Fine Arts* in Ljubljana.

Although his artistic career started towards the end of 1930s, most of his artworks appeared after the Second World War during the socialist period. Most of his adult life Šubic spent in a society where the official communist ideology highly priced manual labour. The communist regime valued workers and hard labour and often nurtured immoderate, affirmative, and enraptured relationship to them (Unkovski-Korica 2014, Horvatinčić 2014). And Šubic was, without any doubt, a genuine representative of ideology of manual work. He believed that work, above all physical labour, is moral obligation of every individual.<sup>2</sup> He also ascribed certain aesthetic character to hard work. As a young boy, he helped his father in the mill and local farmers in their fields. He learned that in the rural environment one could not avoid hard, manual labour. During the war times, when work in the fields was aggravated or sometimes even made impossible, and when food supply was short due to enemy's retaliation atrocities, the people of Poljane Valley faced hunger many times. As the partisan liberation movement during the first years of uprising operated behind the enemy lines using guerrilla tactic, their provision with food and clothes was heavily dependent on support provided by local farmers living in lone houses in the hills of Poljane Valley. This only reinforced the artist's conviction that hard work and working farmer hands in relation to the material world of Poljane Valley should be fully respected and highly priced.

<sup>1</sup> Some of the journals that he took part in as an illustrator, such as *Naša žena* (Our Woman, a magazine for women) or *Ciciban* (a journal for the pupils in primary school), are still being published.

<sup>2</sup> The author collected information about Šubic's personal life mostly from the interviews with his daughter Maja Dolores Šubic, also a painter, and his late wife Sely Debrea Šubic, for which he is profoundly grateful to them. Another important source was documentary movies about his work made by RTV Ljubljana (the National Television) during his life.

## 2. Elements of American Regionalism in Šubic's partisan liberation movement art

Was Šubic's art influenced by the artistic movement called Regionalism, especially American Regionalism? And if it was, how and to which degree? During the socialist regime, Šubic was understood as a genuine and leading representative of partisan liberation movement art, although he was never considered a conformist among his colleagues and art historians. Šubic, who had due to his partisan liberation movement experiences, good connections, and a high reputation among the members of the Communist establishment, was often invited to participate in working out monuments, raised in honour of Slovenian partisan liberation movement. If he was influenced by American Regionalism, would this give to H. W. Janson's and Wanda M. Corn's observation about international character of American Regionalism (Janson 1943) an additional confirmation?

Regionalism was American realist modern art movement originated in the 1930s. The characteristic elements of American Regionalism were a) realistic style of painting, b) depiction of rural scenes and themes from American countryside, c) addressing social, economic and political issues of American rural working class, d) nostalgic remembering of idyllic life of American past rural society, e) bridging the gap between strictly abstract art and Academic realism, and f) it was promoted by conservative, anti-Modernist American critics, with clear intention to break away



Figure 2. *Dražgoška pieta / Dražgoše pieta*, 1977. Oil on canvas, 80 x 100 cm. Private collection.

from European influences and represent a genuine American national art style. The most visible and influential representative of American Regionalism was Grant Wood with his paintings, for instance *American Gothic*. But while Janson (1943) questions the genuine regional character of the movement by pointing to the possible influence which German Neo-Biedermeier might have on Wood's work, Corn (1983), on the other hand, believes that American Regionalism is an authentic product of American culture, namely Iowa architecture, frontier photographs and Midwestern literature and history at the beginning of the 20th century, partially triggered by Wood's recognition during his stay in Paris, confessed in New York Herald Tribune in 1936, "*that all the really good ideas I'd ever had come to me while I was milking a cow. So, I went back to Iowa*" (Taylor 2005: 62). Although it is a fact that Šubic during his residence in Paris in 1950 was with his thoughts many times at home, as his Parisian sketchbooks were full of sketches of cows and rural scenes from Poljane Valley, several questions nevertheless emerge; was he, at the time when he stayed in Paris, acquainted with the no longer existing American Regionalism? Or was he merely engulfed by the cultural stream of regionalism that lapped across the Europe after the Second world war? And finally, was his decision to shift away from social realism with some elements of cubism, surrealism, expressionism, yet not towards Modernism, but to a distinct version of regionalism, his own 'unique' invention?

Unfortunately, some of the above questions will perhaps never get adequate answers.<sup>3</sup> It would be easier to determine that the artist had knowledge about American Regionalism than that he did not know anything about it. Perhaps we could make a conclusion that Šubic may have heard about American Regionalism, but his knowledge about this American art movement was not profound. After all, he expressed his opinion about the existence of genuine Slovenian art and its openness to outside influences in one of his rare interviews given for the Slovenian national television in 1969:

I think that if one is an honest artist and Slovenian, then there is certainly a bit of Slovenian touch in his or her artworks. However, I personally should not intentionally search for it. At least not in these times, when the world is so open and connected. This would be completely wrong (Kloboves).

A closer look at Šubic's paintings unveils a few things. First, although his art is not an ideal example of realist art, it does not at all fit into the category of Modernist art, and it is not an abstract art either. There are elements of cubism, social realism, surrealism, expressionism, and figurative art presented in his artworks, but no single artistic style prevailed. In this matter, Šubic was an eclecticist. His eclectic method originated from his desire to stay simple: "*Forms painted in my artworks,*" said Šubic, "*are plain. It seems to me that this is most likely so because I am a simple*

<sup>3</sup> I was not able to find any information whether Šubic was acquainted with American Regionalism. There were no books, brochures or any other documents found in his personal archive, which would imply that he was ever interested in American Regionalism. Even people, who were part of the artist's private life at the time, cannot tell that. However, according to the painter, Jože Ciuha, who was a very good friend of him and was together with him in Paris, Šubic was not acquainted with American Regionalism.

*person. I cannot stand any artificialness. It seems to me such pretended ignorance”* (Kloboves). In his paintings plain forms are combined to gain maximum effects.

Second, there are several motives depicted in his paintings. Rural image of Poljane valley is only one motive, yet even the rest of the motives are tightly related to the rural culture and environment. Landscapes, still lifes and images of partisan fighters, all are connected to the rural society and rural environment. Landscapes are usually images of Poljane Valley. In still lifes the artist uses different elements from rural everyday life: food of a simple farmer’s cuisine, pottery, and tableware they use, wine, flowers and so on. And the partisans depicted in his paintings are just common farmers transformed, due to the war circumstances, into the partisan fighters, who would like to return to their homes and fields the minute the war ends.

Third, Šubic was sensitive to various social, economic, and political issues of Slovenian rural environment. Many of his paintings are allegories of farm everyday life or depict harsh life of those who either lost their farms during economic crises before the war or were just hired farmer workers who travelled from farm to farm in search of a better life. However, his tribute goes also to the partisan liberation movement.

Fourth, Šubic’s return, similar to Joe Jones’ (Marling 1987: 46-59) or Wood’s (Corn 1983), to the rural themes at the beginning of the 1950s was in opposition to established socialist interpretation of art. According to the socialist regime the artists should take an active role in the construction of the new political, social and historical order. Sometimes the role of the artist was, consequently, reduced merely to dissemination of ideological propaganda of the new regime. But in the eyes of the socialist establishment artists should not look back to the past, let alone depict it as an idyllic historical period. The present and the future belong to the workers, not to the farmers. Despite of his turn, he remained the most appreciated Slovenian partisan painter, even among the socialist elite, till the end of his life. One reason for this was that change did not come overnight. Šubic gradually and quietly distanced himself from official ideology during the 1950s. He never really stopped painting motives from WW II, he just added motives from rural life to his work. And finally, the socialist regime elevated memories of partisan liberation movement to the level of nostalgic mythology, which went hand in hand with Šubic’s sense of nostalgia. There is, however, a symbolic value in the tragic fact that Šubic passed away in December 1989 on the eve of social, political, and economic changes from socialism to capitalism, from a single-party political system to democracy. It seems as if he had a mysterious and tragic ‘hunch’ that one historical period to which he once belonged, is over and that the morning will bring a new political and economic era.

### **3. Symbolic meaning of the hand in Šubic’s paintings**

Beyond any doubt hands had, and still have today, a privileged position in artistic creation. Hands are a tool of artists’ imagination with which they transform material world into art objects. Although artists are not actually forced to use their



Figure 3. *Kmet / Farmer*, 1966. Oil on canvas, 55 x 55 cm. Private collection.

hands during the process of art creation, hands are nevertheless the most common and practical mean of artistic endeavour. Hands may even be a product of artistic creativity itself as the hands can be an artwork themselves. And I do not mean only painted or sculptured hands. Imagine a dancer, or even better a mime, who can produce symbolic language merely by using his own hands. And despite that with the emergence of computer and modern communication technology a moment may be reached soon, when hands will be pushed aside or become no more than just a tool of minor importance for artistic expression, hands are still far from obsolete. Even Stelarc (1991), who likes to emphasise the outmoded and obsolete nature of a human body in the modern world, in certain way merely nurtures in his artworks a need for a new, though artificial, body. In his project *Third Hand*, this distinctive part of the human body was even not replaced but was merely supplemented by additional third artificial electro-mechanic arm.

In contradiction with expectations of some art visionaries, the hands are still curious, indefatigable, and irreplaceable. They act, and as such they are an instrument of an individual's revelation of material nature of the world (Tuan 2005). Hands that are in haptic relation to the world of objects, are according to Walter Benjamin, in position of practical experience of life. Such hands are the owner of authentic human experience and knowledge. Or, as Benjamin believed, hands once were exclusive owner, but due to technological progress of modern civilization hands and their

unique haptic experience now become redundant. Technology gained mastery over the human body and mind, and eyes and hands were separated from each other. Industrial production took place within the time defined by machines, now even more by computers, but not any more in the realm of time defined by the work of the human hands (Leslie 1998, see also Palasmaa 2009). Perhaps exactly this is the reason why the majority of the artists keep on using their hands during their creative work, thus answering the question what would be missing if people do not have or use hands (Turner 1992). On the basis of the nature of artistic creation, it can be claimed that Benjamin was only partially right, when he said that an individual's manual experience is a residue of pre-modern society.

There are several reasons for the development of Šubic's distinct and uniquely stylized representation of human hands. I cannot ignore one very intimate aspect crucial for the nature of Šubic's artistic creativity: the artist's sincere identification with the rural people of Poljane valley, stemmed from characteristics of physical labour in which they were involved in everyday rural life.<sup>4</sup> Painters are not necessarily obligated to use body techniques of painting as they can and, in fact, they do use also various incorporeal techniques of painting. Nevertheless, Šubic was a typical traditional painter. For him, undoubtedly, painting was a distinct manual, physical labour.<sup>5</sup> And when an individual performs such physical work as painting is, one watches his own hands, though not necessarily has them in focus all the time. Harmonized coordination between hands and eyes is essential for human agency in general (Turner 1992), not only in the case of painting (Miall and Tchalenko 2001). Though eyes concentrate on canvas and lines made with a brush, painter's hand, in which the brush is held, is in one's field of view. Reflections about close relationship between human hands and eyes in some treatises go along with scholars' metaphorical resemblance between both elements of artistic agency. Like sculptor's hands, which can be compared to the eyes (Pallasmaa 2005), the painter's hands can be compared as well. The hands of the painter are in the specific position in the process of painting, hence distinct symbolic value of the hands for Šubic due to his working experience.<sup>6</sup>

To Martin Heidegger, the hands were more than just a tool of human agency. The hands, says Heidegger, are an element incorporated in thinking. When the hand acts, their agency leads and enables an individual's cognition. However, Heidegger's understanding of the connection between the hand and thinking is

<sup>4</sup> Although after the war, Šubic was a member of the socialist upper class and at least during the first socialist decade he agreed with communist ideology and thus supported the socialist regime, he very rarely in his paintings portrayed any members of the working class. Instead of workers in his painting one can find peasants and farmers from Poljane Valley. Workers appeared merely in his illustrations and drawings he made for youth periodical magazines and books.

<sup>5</sup> One of the painter's colleagues from the partisan print shop, Alenka Gerlovič, writes in her memories of Šubic that his vehement techniques of drawing remind her of a farmer who ploughs a field, so much vigour, necessity and strength was incorporated in his work.

<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, despite momentarily intensive auto reflexes, Šubic's working relation to his own body, his attitude is far from being as intensive as was the bodily relation in case of Paul Cézanne's addiction to his bodily perception (see Brodsky 2005: 37-55).





Figure 4. *Kolona / Column*, 1982, unknown measures. Unknown owner.

limited to phenomenological hand and did not include a painted hand. Still, when the ontological difference between the first and the second hand is accepted and affirmed, or more precisely is taken into consideration when unavoidable or necessary (Zerubavel 1997: 79), we can come to realization that in our case the difference between live and painted hand does not play any major role. More important is to accept a possibility that hands, whether alive or their symbolic image, can function as a symbolic vehicle, which takes the spectator's eye and guides him or her to private thoughts. And Šubic is an example of both aspects, as he by his own manual production of paintings, where he depicted various types of human hands by his live hands leads the spectator's eyes towards thinking about the world, nature, distinctive culture of Poljane Valley and historical part of partisan liberation movement during the Second World War.

However, there is much more in Šubic's art than just a visual representation of a distinct relation between symbolic order and process of thinking in a particular historical times and space. Human hands, as carriers of symbolic order, also enable construction of human community. It was Norbert Elias who depicted the historical role of the hand in origin, maintenance, and preservation of social order. During the process of civilization of the table manners the hands were substituted by the fork and privacy by the public (Elias 1994). Immediate contact between the hands and mouth during food ingestion is nowadays either private, individual matter or

a sign of a high level of confidence achieved among individuals and as such it is an indicator of friendship or any other intimate relation (Classen 2005: 259-263). Of course, it is not just table manners in form of bodily techniques that construct human community. At least two additional elements need to be mentioned: working hands and hands as a mean of communication. The working hands are central to Šubic's artwork, and they are presented in two distinctive ways. First as hands which are involved in hard rural everyday work, and second as hands which are severely affected by hard labour. Hands are portrayed as overworked hands with thick fingers and knuckles. On those paintings where hands are not affected by work, the hands belong to a child or a person who is not familiar with work, like in the painting *Današnja Eva*, who once lived together with Adam in the Garden of Eden and until they were banished, they did not have any positive knowledge about (hard) work. How he depicted the hands of Adam and Eve, the artist pointed to their incapability to construct human community by process of work. The hands that do not have any knowledge of work can exist, according to Šubic, only as an imaginary hand depicted in surrealistic style. This type of hand in Šubic's paintings is not common, for he preferred to present an old and overworked human being, whose hands reflect the suffering in life and all the work that has been done.

The successful character of communicative nature of hands painted in Šubic's artworks is perhaps best evident from the fact that his paintings and frescoes are still extremely popular among Slovenian people. Šubic's artworks allow them nostalgic recollection of distant and already forgotten cultural and social reality. Like Rodin (Gardner 1957: 200-204), Šubic's popularity among people, though geographically limited to Poljane Valley region, to a great extent derives from his ability to see and represent aesthetic dimension as well as cultural and social meaning of people's physical working gestures. His images of rural people are telling a story about basic human emotions and common destiny instinctively recognised and comprehended by anyone, even by common people, like farmers from Poljane Valley.<sup>7</sup> The relationship between the painter and the spectators of the artworks, according to Richard Wollheim, is defined by material relation between artist's hands and spectators' eyes. A painter's hands, says Wollheim, react to spectator's gaze and therefore the artist by applying artistic agency creates an artwork (Wollheim 2005). It is safe to believe that the mechanism is the same in the case of Šubic. Yet, although his hands were 'sensible' to spectator's gaze, he nevertheless manages to avoid tasteless popularity. The relation between artist's hands and spectator's eyes, about which Wollheim speaks in his essay, can be inverted; hands of the simple and plain farmer from Poljane Valley were capable of 'drawing attention' to the artist's eyes, for Šubic during his life cultivated common and friendly relationship with the residents.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> By 'simple and plain common people' Šubic addressed the technology of farming used before and soon after WW II before socialist modernization during the late 1950s and early 1960s substituted the greater part of manual work at farms in Poljane Valley.

<sup>8</sup> On one occasion, Šubic expressed his devotion to the people from Poljane Valley "What I find especially important is my relationship to a plain and average person, namely farmers. (...) I am attracted to uncorrupted and authentic people, who are like soil, and this is what attracts me the most. (...) To a certain extent, I understand them (...)" (Kloboves).

#### 4. Conclusions

The images of hands have central position in the work of Slovenian painter Ive Šubic, a unique Slovenian Regionalist and partisan painter. He shows us the hands as a powerful and prophetic symbol, the most magnificent and sensible means with which an individual can express various intentions and mental conditions. Motifs, which the painter uses to speak symbolically about the human hand, are simple and common and originate from everyday life of common rural people of Poljane Valley. His artworks present the interweaving of motifs of work, relationship to the food and fighting for survival in a harsh rural environment. In all cases the hands are depicted exaggeratedly big and overworked, palms are rough, fingers and knuckles are thick. Those hands are certainly not the hands of people who live in towns or cities and are accustomed to idleness and leisure, and to whom the hard work is unknown territory. Šubic portrayed the hands of the farmers and only occasionally the workers. Yet, the overworked hands are not just some hands of the farmers, they belong to common Slovenian people, who resisted the occupation forces and fought for the nation's existence during WW II. The working hands were gradually transformed during the resistance into fighting hands, which at first clumsily handled arms and threw hand grenades at enemy's posts, until they finally pushed the German occupation forces out of their land. The price that the hands had to pay due to the war, reflected in hungry hands, which were not able to feed their owners (hence Šubic's distinct relation to food and its depiction in his paintings) and in the dead hands, which were the victims of the enemy's atrocities inflicted upon Slovenian nation. And for that very reason the hands which were in condition to offer comfort and support to the people in need, were invaluable.

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