

What is a Painter without a Gun?

Nasta Rojc: A Legend for Our Times

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1. Introduction

The image of a woman bearing arms is not foreign to the Balkans. Ever since the 3rd century BC when, after the death of her husband, the Queen Regent Teuta led the Illyrian tribe of the Ardiaei into battle against the Romans and caused them many problems, the memory of this woman armed with a spire has been well preserved beyond her stronghold in Rhizon in the Bay of Kotor. The latest proof is the commemoration of Teuta on the Albanian 100 leka coin. Then there were the *virdžine/tobelije/burrneshë* – sworn virgins of the families that lost or did not have sons – who took a vow of celibacy and assumed the social standing of a man in their families, tribes and villages in the high mountains of Montenegro, Kosovo and Albania. They appropriated the male gender and the man's role in a community, wore men's clothes, smoked cigarettes and took on the duties usually assigned to men, warfare included. Some of them – *burrneshës* – were even prominent as military officers in Enver Hoxha's army. During World War II, the women partisans, armed women warriors, became symbols of resistance to the Nazis and of the emancipation that was supposed to follow the Communist revolution in Yugoslavia.

Even if all these examples are taken into consideration, and for all the reference to gender equality and the emancipation of women over the past few decades, the image of an armed woman has not, however, been characteristic of Croatia and its culture, which is more commonly regarded as mellower, perhaps even more petty-bourgeois, Central European, and Mediterranean. Therefore, we might ponder on the reception of the painting »Self-portrait with a rifle« (fig. 1) when it appeared in 1912. Viewing it today, an observer would immediately jump to a conclusion about the fluidity of gender roles, and would hint at the author's apparent lesbianism, although at the time the painting was created this would certainly not have been the case. This quite unusual self-portrait was received with a mixture of awe and expectation of the inevitable, a sign of a new, more progressive age. The artist was Nasta Rojc, in her time a painter of international repute, and this work was apparently

the first in the history of Croatian art to represent a woman with a rifle. Outfitted in hunting gear, the artist invites us to pose the question about whether this image was the result of feminist rebellion or an indication of the privileged life of a bourgeois daughter.



Fig. 1: Nasta Rojc, Autoportret u lovackom odijelu (Self-portrait with a rifle), 1912, oil on canvas. National Museum of Modern Art, Zagreb, Croatia. Goran Vranić © Nacionalni muzej moderne umjetnosti, Zagreb, 2023.

2. Nasta Rojc's Background and Education

Although at first glance one might consider Nasta Rojc's background as typically bourgeois, and therefore comfortable in the circumstances of turn-of-the-century Croatia, where the middle-class stratum was extremely thin, her family situation should be regarded as rather more complex. From the 1980s, feminists have steadily insisted on the oppressive patriarchal environment that was trying to suppress Nasta Rojc's artistic ambitions. Her father was supposedly the one who tried to

prevent her development as an artist, and to whom his rebellious daughter had to address her demands regarding her education and artistic training. In her diary, Nasta Rojc herself testified to his insistent opposition to her career as a painter (Kovač 2018: 15). What, however, were her parents really like?

Nasta Rojc was born in Bjelovar, a provincial town in northern Croatia to the influential family of Milan Rojc and Slava Blažić. Her mother bore seven children, five of whom survived infancy. Nasta's father, Milan Rojc, was an attorney and a politician and although his profession might point to a dull and bureaucratic career and indeed character, he was not without literary leanings, since in his early days he published two plays which were comedies. He supported education for all children, irrespective of their gender. Nasta's sister Vjera Rojc (her later married name was Katušić) was the first woman to gain a doctorate in pharmacology from the University of Zagreb in 1915. It could be that under the influence of his capable daughters, he became rather open to women's education. Moreover, Milan Rojc went on the record with an article he wrote in support of women as lawyers. His article is systematically argued from the feminist perspective, because he claimed that women had proved their capabilities during WWI by taking part in the war efforts, and in certain cases even by taking up arms. Insistently fighting prejudices against women, Nasta's father must have taken a lesson from his daughters, who each in her own way paved the way for women in the professions. A telling example of his willingness to learn and listen, and as the result of many arguments with Nasta about her wish to become a painter, during his tenure as minister of education he helped to establish the Academy of Fine Arts in Zagreb in 1907.

Nasta Rojc spent her childhood at the large family estate of Rojčev at Gudovac. For all the references to her physical weakness, and she indeed suffered from many illnesses, she was no stranger to physical work. As she wrote in her diary, she harvested the corn, chopped the wood, cut the grass in the heat until she was too tired to continue, and she even ploughed in the rain with oxen and horses (Nasta Rojc 2014: 17).

She was at first educated in Varaždin by the Ursuline Sisters, whom she did not particularly appreciate, possibly due to her early atheism. She started to think of herself as an artist very early in life, an idea that was not easily accepted by her parents. Still, due to constant medical issues, she moved to Zagreb upon finishing two years of secondary school in Bjelovar to continue her training as an artist at the atelier of Oton Iveković, one of the prominent representatives of the Croatian historicist school. She then proceeded to Vienna to continue with additional training at the *Kunstschule für Frauen und Mädchen* (1902–1904) where she was taught by Austrian artist Hans Tichy and where she formed a life-long friendship with the Austrian Impressionist Tina Blue. Vienna was an inspiration in many different ways, and Nasta dived into different courses at the *Kunstschule*. She remembered how her father insisted that she took a course in photography, so that she might be able to

support herself with that practical skill in the future while painting. While in Vienna, Nasta enjoyed riding in the Prater every morning, and even managed to buy a pony, Olenka. Riding in full hunting gear, and carrying arms as well, she created quite a stir among the villagers in the outskirts of Vienna, who used to whisper about her: »She greases her rifle with something, and even exchanges secret signs with horses! A witch!« (Kovač 2018: 23).

Continuing to study art and painting, Nasta Rojc attended the *Frauen Akademie* in Munich, where she befriended some of the best Croatian painters of her generation, the most prominent of whom was Miroslav Kraljević, as well as Josip Račić and Oskar Herman. Very useful for a future portrait artist, she developed an interest in psychiatry, and read extensively about it. After graduation, she did the obligatory Grand Tour in Italy, and was taken by the works of the American painter John Singer Sargent that she saw exhibited in Venice. She rushed back to Zagreb, where she was eager to implement whatever she had learned on the way and established herself as a successful portrait painter.

3. *Self-portrait with a Rifle*

From early on, Nasta and the rest of her family firmly shared the sense that she was not a typical child. At the age of seven she had already rebuffed the narrative about God and formed her own judgement about the laws of nature. Related to this, she formed her own »life programme« as an intelligent creature that had a will of her own and stuck to it for the whole of her life. »I am not going to be a blind slave of nature«, she wrote in her diary (Kovač 2018: 7). Such an attitude was certainly not expected from a young woman, but Nasta was able to establish herself as an independent entity in a society that had very clear, if not particularly ambitious, perspectives for their daughters. Her mother tried (in vain) to teach her how to cook, and was rather unhappy to see her off to study in Vienna. Her father indicated in many of their arguments that he perceived the way of life of an artist was not just unsuitable for a young lady from a respectable family, but also quite dire, since they already had artists in the family who were constantly on the edge of survival. For a young woman in search of a career, the economic dimension was a major family concern. One needs to admit that, in contrast to the interwar period when Nasta Rojc actually achieved prominence as one of the finest portrait artists in Croatia, selling 277 paintings and even managing to design and build her own villa in the residential part of Zagreb, the lean postwar years brought her to the brink of starvation. So, her parents' worries proved to be substantiated in due course.

At the time, however, Nasta displayed nothing but courage which was materialized in her holding her gun. Upon arrival in Vienna, she rented a small room, which she wanted to organize according to her tastes. The first thing to do was to hang her

rifle, belt with ammunition and her handgun above her bed, in place of a painting of Madonna, a move rather unusual for a young woman. On the table close at hand, she put her *gusle* – the national instrument – a fiddle that was ready for her when she came back from school in the evening. Her riding whip was hung on a nail next to the door, in place of the sprinkler that held the holy water. The rest of her possessions were her paints and brushes that she took to school instruction every morning. In the city of Sigmund Freud, it would not be difficult to understand the connection of the rifle, gun and riding whip with the paint brushes as psychoanalytical tools to explain her state of mind. She was not only a (not so) dutiful daughter in search of her artistic career, but also a young woman who expressed the need to achieve pleasure in a way that was as unconventional as it was subversive.

Travel was part of the pleasure, as well as a learning experience. As was typical of a young woman of her background, Nasta Rojc used to travel for education, for medical purposes, for holidays, and those journeys bore fruit. Among the many different places she visited, Great Britain held a special role for her. It was the country of her close friend and travel companion, Alexandrina Onslow, who introduced her to the way of life in England and Scotland, about which Nasta Rojc published a series of extensive commentaries in epistolary form on her return to Zagreb. More importantly, during her stay in London in 1926, Nasta Rojc prepared an exhibition of her work at the Gieves Art Gallery at 22 Old Bond Street. This exhibition not only affirmed her own ambition and artistic standing, but was also a sign of the assertion of Croatian art in an international setting. Aware of the lack of understanding of Croatian culture and art among the British public, Nasta Rojc took it upon herself to inform interested audiences not only of her work, but also about the work of her colleagues, such as that of her friend and opera singer, Maja Strozzi, who sang at her vernissage.

An important part of her English experience was interest in the changing role of women in public life, in particular regarding the role of women artists. Upon her return to Zagreb in 1927, and inspired by the Women's International Art Club of London, Nasta Rojc founded the Women's Artists Club in Zagreb. This club gathered an impressive number of women artists headed by Lina Crnčić-Virant, who helped her as co-founder. The other members were Zdenka Ostović-Pexidr Srića, Cata Dujšin-Ribar, Mila Wod, Vjera Bojničić, Mary Stiborsky, Zenaida Bandur, Lucie Kučera-Buchmeister, Leopoldina Auer-Schmidt, Mira Mayr-Marochino and Danica Peklić-Peyer, a remarkable count of dynamic female artists. The club and its activities resulted not only in several collective exhibitions, but also prompted public debate on the role and social standing of women in Croatia. Some of the artists and art critics that took part in this debate were for the first time of a feminist orientation. Marija Hanževački, Verena Han, Roksana Cuvač and Reska Šandor were among them, openly countering people who were against women's public engagement and who opposed it vigorously.

Another consequence of Nasta Rojc's travels was the widespread network of friends and colleagues she acquired that helped her throughout her life. One of the prominent figures close to the British suffragist movement whom Nasta mentions in her correspondence was the actress Vera Louise Holme. Vera started her acting career at the beginning of the century, and because she very often played male roles, she earned the nickname »Jack«. It was the period when Vera became engaged in the suffragist movement, and became notorious among the London elite as the Pankhurst family chauffeur. During WWI, just like Alexandrina Onslow, she actively participated in the Serbian front, as well as in other parts of the Balkans, and so became acquainted with Nasta Rojc. Vera Holme was a member of private and informal lesbian associations which, in line with the demands of the time, were rather secretive. One such association was called the »Foosack League«, whose membership was limited to women and suffragettes. Some of them took an active part in the British war effort, and spent a part of WWI in south eastern Europe. Nasta remembered the time when she met Holme and two of her friends in Dubrovnik in the aftermath of the war. After befriending Onslow, Nasta Rojc became a part of the network, and during the 1920s corresponded with Vera Holme and invited her to visit Zagreb, »that most civilized of Yugoslav cities« as she referred to it. What followed were the Adriatic holidays and voyages on »Festina Lente«, the yacht that she mentioned frequently in her letters. While visiting England and Scotland, Nasta Rojc would remember the courageous British ladies whose relentless work, often under arms during the Great War, she admired greatly.

The experience of drawing close to women who lived and enjoyed their life outside the company of men must have appealed to Nasta's individuality, and in particular must have helped her assert her gender role and sexual orientation. As a teenager, Nasta already seems to have felt and behaved differently from her environment. Contrary to what was projected for a young lady, she had no patience with household duties, she refused to cook, and was not intellectually inclined, but she did like to smoke, which must have been a sign of rebellion at the time. In addition, she refused to be courted by young gentlemen, and managed to negotiate an agreement with her father which allowed her to continue art studies in Vienna, without a promise to get married. It seems that from very early on she intended to become a painter and not to follow the expected destiny of women in becoming a wife and mother. »I want to learn how to paint, and not to create sick and unhappy people«, she confided in her diary (Kovač 2018: 17). It could have been a sign of her being sexually inclined toward women, but there is no direct confirmation of this in her published work.

Although she expressed her reluctance to marry quite openly, Nasta Rojc did eventually decide to comply with societal expectations. Nasta Rojc met her future husband, Branko Šenoa, when she was 15 years old. A young artist himself, a painter from the well-known Zagreb family of the prolific novelist August Šenoa, Branko

impressed her enormously because of his willingness to answer her many questions about the art of painting. Her decision to marry him in 1910 was based on yet another compromise, again with her father, but also with Branko himself. She made it a condition to live life in »a false marriage«, i.e., an unconsummated marriage, a decision that she defended with her continuous poor health. This marriage of convenience suited them both, since they managed to acquire an atelier that they shared.

Toward the end of the interwar period, and after the publication of her travelogues from England and Scotland in epistolary form, Nasta started to publish more of her writings and reflections. She was prompted to publish several interesting and women-oriented articles by her very good friend, Marija Jurić Zagorka, the most prominent Zagreb journalist, who was in the 1930s editor-in-chief of *Ženski list* [Women's Journal]. Besides, Nasta Rojc appeared on the Zagreb radio station on the occasion of her exhibition in 1938 in an effort to inform the wider public about her work, and as an original way to encourage the public to come to her exhibition.

After the very productive years of the 1930s, Nasta Rojc stopped painting almost completely. The coming of the war, another global conflict that she has anticipated in some of her work, together with the death of Branko Šenoa in 1939, made her pause and turn to another form of activism. With the war starting in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in 1941, Nasta Rojc and Alexandrina Onslow decided to help the resistance efforts of the partisans. As democrats who were opposed to the German advances, as well as to the establishment of the Independent State of Croatia, in fact a German-Italian condominium, they were both banished from their home and in July 1943 were imprisoned following an accusation by two Ustashas – Croatian Nazi collaborators. Although the accusation could not be proved, and they were released from the prison hospital, Nasta could not repossess her house, so they had to live in the atelier.

After the end of WWII, their antifascist stand did not help them at all, since their house was again occupied by »the soldiers who went into the woods only at the end of the war. They do not possess any social sense, and are not interested in any kind of cultural activity, but only want to live a more comfortable life«, recalled Nasta in her diary (Kovač 2018: 67). The greatest disappointment for them came in the form of the same member of the Ustasha movement who had reported them to the authorities at the beginning of the war. He turned coat after the arrival of the revolutionary justice, and made Nasta realize that »the people are suffering still from the power of egoists, fascists. Will they ever set themselves free? Will they ever enjoy the fruits of huge sacrifices?« (Kovač 2018: 68).

The postwar years were not particularly favourable for Nasta Rojc and Alexandrina Onslow. In 1946, Onslow was already »blind, deaf, very ill, 76, cold, and doubtless also hungry«, and the situation was made worse by the fact that both Nasta Rojc and her friend depended significantly on the help of their old friends abroad (LSE library/archives, London. 7VJH.3.4 pt.2, pdf. Skrine to Holme, London, January

17,1946). After the end of WWII, Vera Holme tried to ease their abysmal situation by sending them parcels of essential provisions through their friends in the high echelons of British politics. One such person was the British Ambassador to Belgrade, H.E. Sir Ralph Skrine Stevenson, who confirmed the delivery of »a hot water bottle to Miss Onslow«, but advised not to send parcels any more: »I am afraid that although letters usually seem to get through I cannot say that there is any really safe way of sending parcels to Yugoslavia as yet, except perhaps through the Red Cross« (LSE library/archives, London. 7VJH.3.4 pt.2. pdf. Stevenson to Holme, Belgrade, February 9, 1946). Their property, which included the villa that was built according to the design of Hugo Ehrlich and with Nasta's own earnings in the 1920s in the residential part of Zagreb, on Rokov Perivoj, was taken from them, never to be returned. The Communist authorities moved new tenants into their house. Most probably due to old age, but also because of the limitations of socialist realism that were imposed on artists in the aftermath of the war and in the revolutionary takeover, Nasta Rojc more or less stopped painting. Onslow died in 1950 in Zagreb, and Nasta Rojc passed away on her birthday on 6 November 1964. Contrary to sentimental views occasionally expressed in today's press, they were not buried in the same tomb in Zagreb's Mirogoj cemetery.

4. The Reception of Nasta Rojc in Croatia

After many years of neglect and even oblivion that lasted throughout WWII and the Communist period, during which interest in Nasta Rojc and her work rested with a few committed collectors and friends, a new generation of young women, the second generation of Croatian feminists of the 1980s, started to look into her opus with renewed attention. Lydia Sklevicky, a pioneer of women's history in Croatia, was the first to analyse the relationship between Nasta Rojc and Alexandrine Onslow at the 1987 conference »Black Lambs and Grey Falcons« at the University of Bradford in England. The importance of Nasta Rojc's art was acknowledged mainly by the relentless work of Josip Kovačić, an art collector who specialized in collecting the art of women artists when such an interest was regarded as marginal. He donated his enormous collection to the City of Zagreb after his death, but it is still awaiting proper assessment, although some of the works are retrievable on the internet.

The public change of attitude toward Nasta Rojc and her art was acknowledged by the Croatian postal service, which in 2006 issued a commemorative stamp of the famous self-portrait with a gun. Several exhibitions, most recently the retrospective of 2014 at the Art Pavilion in Zagreb, finally addressed all the unjust neglect, and presented to the Croatian public more than 100 paintings, among which her »Self-portrait with a rifle« was again the most prominent. As far as the popular culture representation of Nasta Rojc's legacy is concerned, the latest example is the graphic

novel »Nasta Rojc: Me, the Fighter« published in 2018 by the Museum of Contemporary Art in Zagreb. The authors, art historian and critic Leonida Kovač and Ana Muščet, an artist who created collages, entitled the book after one of Nasta's lost, and then rediscovered, paintings. Nasta Rojc's voice in this publication is authentic – parts of her unpublished autobiography: »Light, Shadow and Darkness«, her published correspondence, and autobiographical notes written after WWII, all point to Nasta's rebellious nature and search for fulfilment in art, as in life. The quoted texts accentuate the most significant parts of her life experiences, and were taken from the sources preserved by Josip Kovačić and Elena Puškarsky, which have not yet been completely presented to the public.

5. Conclusion

In an attempt to reveal the art of survival of an artist and a lesbian under fascist and communist dictatorships, this work provides insight into the ways in which this prominent intellectual continues to intrigue new generations in a post-Yugoslav and post-communist setting. The question, however, raised at the beginning of this work has not been answered unequivocally. Considering how exceptional her life story was, the manifestation however of her rebellion was rather subtle. The life of Nasta Rojc was a life of privilege, indeed, not only because of relatively comfortable circumstances of her family circle in the interwar Croatia. One could consider it an ultimate privilege to be allowed to work without obstacles, following one's own artistic and intellectual motivation, and this is how Nasta Rojc managed her career as a painter and a public figure. Her Self-portrait with a gun, was at the same time a sign of a feminist revolt, an expression of a rebellious dutiful daughter, who had decided very early on to negotiate every step of her own career and life circle. Rediscovered as a paradigmatic feminist and lesbian icon at the times of changing patriarchal mores, in the twilight of the communist regime, this gunwoman's feminist rebellion continues to be an inspiration and model for intrigued audiences in contemporary Croatia.

6. Acknowledgement

I would like to acknowledge the help of Gillian Murphy and Clive Graham from the library and archives of the London School of Economics and Political Science for their friendliness and for making available to me the materials from the Vera Holme legacy, kept in the Women's Library.

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