

DR VALTER RUKAVINA – AMATEUR PAINTER

DR. VALTER RUKAVINA – SLIKAR AMATER

Daina Glavočić*

SUMMARY

In this essay Dr Valter Rukavina (Rijeka 1896-1972), excellent specialist in infectious diseases and professor of the Rijeka University School of Medicine, is presented as successful amateur painter. He had been refining his talent through relentless practice since the school days, complementing it with skills and advice from established painters he associated with. He favoured figurative, realistic and somewhat romantic expression for his themes such as coastal landscapes, marinas, Quarnero sceneries, still life in tempera or oil, and drawings in ink or sepia. Despite partial colour blindness, he successfully used colour. He featured in a number of group exhibitions such as that of amateur painters of Rijeka in 1950, of painters physicians of Yugoslavia (Zagreb, 1956), in the Second International Exhibition of Contemporary Art (Florence, 1964), exhibition of the Rijeka branch of the Croatian Association of Visual Artists (Belgrade, 1966), and the 1969 exhibition in Opatija. His native city hosted two one-man exhibitions, the first retrospective in 1971, while he was still alive, and the second posthumous in 2007, with a good selection of his life's work.

Key words: Medicine, painting, 20th century, Valter Rukavina, Rijeka, Croatia

Dr Valter Rukavina was born in Rijeka in 1896. Betraying the family's seagoing tradition, he completed medical studies in Prague in 1921 and specialized in infectology in Zagreb. He was remembered by many citizens of Rijeka for his successful clinical practice. He died suddenly in Rijeka in 1971, leaving behind numerous paintings, created with great passion throughout his career, and more intensely after retirement, when he could devote more time and energy to painting.

* Daina Glavočić M.Sc, senior curator. Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art. Dolac 1, HR - 51000 Rijeka

Despite serious and challenging work in Sušak, and despite family obligations, he'd find time for painting. At today's, distance, it is possible to make a critical appraisal of his rather rich preserved painting collection.. His talent became evident early on, in elementary school during WW2, when drawing was an escape from the harsh reality. His interest in visual art enhanced by persistent painting. His skill improved through discussions and friendship with the Rijeka painters of the 1960s such as Mirko Uzorinac, Zlatko Šulentić, and Vilim Svečnjak, or through the works of painters he admired such as Ivo Kalina, Antun Žunić, Romolo Venucci, and especially Ladislav Šošterić.

As an amateur painter, Dr Valter Rukavina had pursued figurative expression for as long as he lived. This was his natural choice and conviction, uninfluenced by changes and trends in visual arts of the time. He would not venture in the uncharted territory of abstract art which seduced so many of his contemporaries. He painted realistic, but also romantic themes that attracted and enraptured him, that surrounded and inspired him, trying to capture an atmosphere and a specific character of an ambient. The most frequent motifs of his paintings are coastal landscapes and panoramas of little towns in the Croatian littoral area, which successfully reflect the quietude and limpidity of the sunlit coast, especially the transparency of the sea in contrast with the solid quality of the land.

As to the subject, Dr Valter Rukavina had a particular liking for olive groves, littoral panoramas of coastal towns or picturesque marinas of the Quarnero islands and bays. He did not forget his city of Rijeka, especially

Trsat and the Old Town, the latter growing smaller every day, with demolished old houses, but nonetheless with romantic appearance. He also tried painting still life such as colourful flowers in a vase and fish (sardine, grouper, etc.) as an everyday, specific feature of local households.

Dr Rukavina painted in gouache or oil, and many realistic drawings

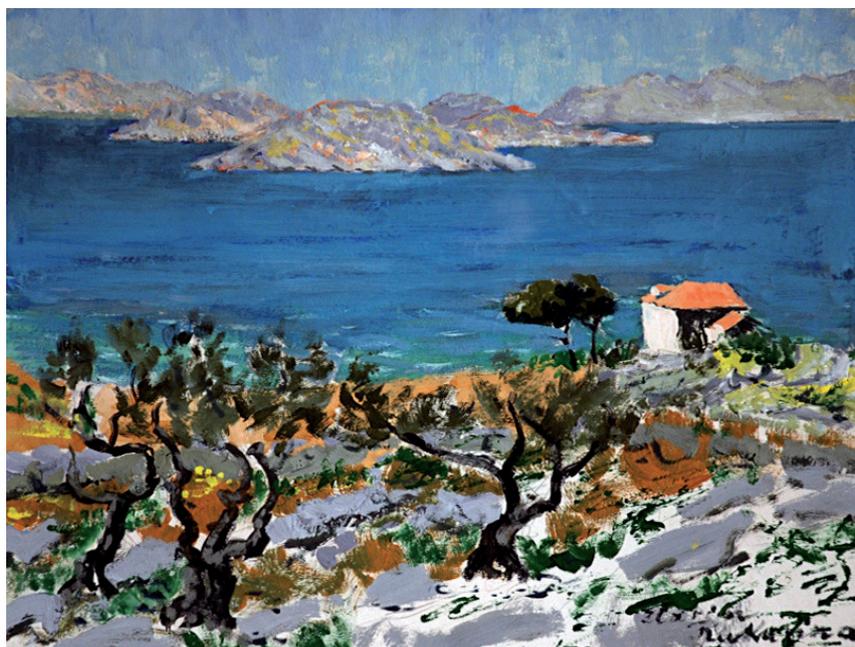


Self-portrait, aquarel, 1971

Autoportret, akvarel, 1971.

in ink or sepia demonstrate his elaborate and careful preparation for oils. It is amazing that he mastered this demanding technique as a self-taught amateur without special training. As a result, his paintings are well-preserved in spite of the fact that many are over 50 years old. It is even more amazing that he was able to achieve so cheerful and colourful effects in view of his partial colour-blindness.

By the end of WW2, Rukavina witnessed the rise of a new, post-war visual life of Rijeka, and took part with his amateur works as early as 1949. These were the times that saw the establishment of the first visual arts associations and exhibitions such as the *Exhibition of visual amateurs of the City of Rijeka*, set up in May 1950 by the local branch of the Association of Visual Artists of Croatia and the Union of Cultural-Educational Societies of Rijeka to celebrate the May Day at the premises of today's Mali Salon Gallery. Exhibitors were factory workers, chauffeurs, house-painters, engineers, managers, clerks, military officers, sea captains, , and retired individuals. A few names stick out whose works have endured the test of time and have taken their place in the visual arts of Rijeka, such as



Coastal landscapes, oil on canvass

Primorski pejzaž, ulje na platnu

Sonja Braović, Pavica Kaftanić, and Ljubomir Biro. Dr Valter Rukavina belongs to this group of amateur artists.

Among doctors, there have always been many lovers of visual arts and painting collectors. Many in fact are good painters themselves, and some have distinguished themselves as illustrators for anatomy classes (professor Drago Perović or professor Jelena Krmpotić). “The world’s best medical illustrator wasn’t a painter, nor a technical designer, but an M.D., Frank E. Netter, from the USA”, says in internist Dr Joško Baica in his article “Doctors and Visual Art”). Exhibitions of artworks by physicians from all over the world were regular at the time. One such exhibition, held in Hague, displayed the works of Dr Valter Rukavina and Dr L. Pavelić, as representatives of the former Yugoslavia. As early as 1954, an exhibition of paintings and sculptures by Yugoslav doctors, held at the premises of the Society of Architects in Zagreb, presented five Rukavina’s oils (two still lifes, *Hospital in Rijeka*, *Sirocco*, and *Littoral Landscape*), along with works of 11 other physicians from Zagreb, Belgrade, Ljubljana, Vranja, and Občina (Opicina near Trieste, Italy). Later in 1956, the Croatian



Pilchards, oil on canvass

Srdele, ulje na platnu



Produce market of Stari grad, inkwash on paper

Zelena tržnica u Starom gradu, lavirani tuš na papiru

Association of Visual Artists hosted the first show of visual artworks by Yugoslav physicians. It was organized by young physicians from the Croatian Medical Association, and 15 doctors of all specializations participated with 40 paintings and one sculpture. The exhibition stirred a great interest and was the most visited in Zagreb that year (4890 visitors). The visitors book witnesses the appreciation of Dr Rukavina's exhibits.

Since 1961, Dr Rukavina exhibited at the Rijeka branch of the Croatian Association of Visual Artists as a special guest. In one such exhibition of October 1964, he exhibited two gouaches: *Castle of Bakar* and *A Motif from Selce*, along with other members of the Rijeka branch (Depope, Grčko, Haller, Kalina, Kučinski, Solis, Udatny, Venucci, Virag, Žunić, Bastaić-Rado, Kolar).

In 1964, an exhibition curated by Dr Vanda Ekl was hosted by the *Lo Sprone* Cultural Centre gallery in Florence, Italy. The exhibition presented 15 painters working in Rijeka at the time, including two landscapes in oil by Valter Rukavina. He received an *Attestato di partecipazione* (confirmation of participation) and a small medal from the Second International Exhibition of Contemporary Art, preserved with his family documentation.

In December 1966, the Rijeka branch of the Croatian Association of Visual Artists held a juried exhibition in the Art Gallery of the Serbian Association of Visual Artists in Belgrade, presenting 13 members and five guests, including Dr Valter Rukavina with his gouache *From Krasica*. In 1969 Dr Rukavina also participated at an exhibition in Opatija.

Finally, in 1971, he had a retrospective exhibition in Mali Salon, Rijeka's most prestigious exhibition space. The catalogue essay was written by Dr Radmila Matejčić, herself a physician's wife who was intimately familiar with Rukavina's creative development, and who encouraged his artistic endeavours. Her essay, speaks about the fortunate circumstances in which "the power of reflection and diagnostic observation merge with talent, creating works which speak by fixating reality without embellishing it...". This exhibition was the greatest acknowledgement to Dr Valter Rukavina, and took place on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of Croatian? Yugoslav? Medical Association. The show exhibited 54 landscapes and several still lifes in oil. On behalf of the exhibition organizer, Dr Nikola Korin gave the opening speech praising the sincerity of Rukavina's expression, love for the native soil, his talent, and dedication to painting which provided refuge from the everyday medical concerns, and which culminated after his retirement.

In April 2007, the Club of Sušak Residents set up an exhibition of Rukavina's paintings owned by his family, to remind those who knew Dr Rukavina of his artistic heritage, and to introduce it to the younger generations.

SAŽETAK

Vrstan infektolog i profesor na Medicinskom fakultetu u Rijeci, dr. Valter Rukavina (Rijeka, 1896. – 1972.) u ovom je eseju predstavljen kao uspješan slikar amater. Likovni je talent brusio upornim slikanjem još od školskih dana te ga dopunjavao vještinama i znanjem do zrele dobi, savjetima i druženjem s renomiranim slikarima. Zastupao je figuralni izraz, realistički, a istovremeno i romantičarski, slikajući primorske pejzaže, marine i vedute kvarnerskog područja, mrtvu prirodu u tehnici tempere ili ulja, te crteže tušem ili sepijom. Sve je kolorističke efekte uspijevao realizirati unatoč djelomičnom daltonizmu. Sudjelovao je na više grupnih izložaba: na izložbi likovnih amatera grada Rijeke (1950.); likovnih radova liječnika cijelog svijeta (Zagreb, 1954.); likovnih radova liječnika Jugoslavije (Zagreb, 1956.); Drugoj međunarodnoj izložbi suvremene umjetnosti (Firenca, 1964.); izložbi riječke podružnice Udruženja likovnih umjetnika Hrvatske (Beograd, 1966.) te na izložbi u Opatiji 1969. godine. U rodnome gradu priređene su mu dvije samostalne izložbe – za života velika retrospektiva 1971. te posmrtno 2007. decentan izbor iz cjelokupnog opusa.

Gljučne riječi: medicina, slikarstvo, XX. stoljeće, Valter Rukavina, Rijeka, Hrvatska