

CULTURE

Otto Antonini and the roaring twenties in Croatia

In the 1920s Croatia was not only a poor province from the brink of the ruined Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. Namely, in the postwar decade, until the first waves of global economic crisis, simultaneously with the hard times of poor townspeople, in its capital city there was a parallel and sumptuous existence – life in cafés, accompanied with the Charleston and jazz, memberships in automobile and equestrian clubs; tennis, golf, skiing, cruising on huge steamboats and airship traveling, formal balls of Croatian and Zagreb's élite.

The best chronicler of that élite social life was Otto Antonini, the first-rate sketcher, illustrator, painter, muralist, quick-sketch artist, graphic artist and caricaturist, whose work under the influence of the aesthetics of art deco was unjustly neglected.

On the track of discovering valuable but at the same forgotten names of Croatian art, the Museum of the City of Zagreb and museum adviser Mrs. Željka Kolveshi have set the exhibition about Zagreb in the 1920s and its persistent chronicler Antonini. It is a way of saving from oblivion the man whose work visually shaped everyday life of an exceptional and interesting epoch. Otto Antonini himself

was a part of that social life he depicted. He was an educated person, travel lover and a man of the world, with knowledge of foreign languages, connoisseur of fashion and modernism in architecture and design. He was interested in rowing; he played golf and was a regular guest at all the modish events.

The emphasis of this interesting exhibition rests on Antonini's work in the magazine "Svijet" ("World"),



a real window on the world in the era without TV sets, the weekly with its popular issues eagerly waited in long queues in front of the news-stands all around Croatia. Antonini studied al fresco painting in Siena, but since in the Great War time and postwar era there was not too many orders of his works through churches, he started editing the magazine "Svijet" in 1926. The magazine covered the issues of easy sides of life – entertainment and dance, travel, technique, large-scale car ownership, sport as a life style of élite, not its competitive side and sensations; and its communication charm was based on a visual attraction.

Ten years after the publication of the world fashion bible – Vogue, Croatia had a magazine that in no way lagged after its likely model, and its high graphic standard was equally fine as the French Illustration was.

Up-to-date information and photographs of all parts of the world came from the world news agencies. After seven years of editing the "Svijet", Antonini dedicated himself to painting and soon became a popular portrait artist of Zagreb's high society in a very challenging technique – pastel, and also designed postage stamps. After the World War II he designed advertising posters thus laying the basis of Croatian advertising industry.



Along with afore-said, Antonini is the founder and illustrator of art and humoristic semimonthly Šišmiš ("Bat"); he is the author of murals and altar images in a few churches in Zagreb; he made graphic papers, mostly lithography, bases for advertising and journalism, drafts for postage stamps, sport and advertising posters. The exhibition set at the Museum of the City of Zagreb is opened till the end of December.