

Conference Review: Southeast European Silversmithing: Liturgical Objects and the Construction of a Cultural, Technological and Iconographical Network in the Early Modern Period*

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With the expansion of the “material turn” in the humanities during the last couple of decades, a new perspective has emerged: objects are not considered just as material reflections of certain cultures but as active participants in their formation. In essence, the issue has shifted from thinking about the objects to thinking with the objects. Therefore, the relationship between a person and the material reality that surrounds them opened up numerous questions that are difficult to answer by relying on the rigid positivist boundaries between disciplines. In addition to the encouragement of interdisciplinary approaches, studies of material culture dismantled the hierarchy of artistic creation, releasing objects from the rather marginalized field of the “applied arts”. Led by this paradigm, the Society for the Study of Decorative Arts and Silversmithing from Belgrade and the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Belgrade organized an international conference titled Southeast European Silversmithing: Liturgical Objects and the Construction of a Cultural, Technological and Iconographical Network in the Early Modern Period. This is the first scholarly gathering in the region entirely dedicated to the neatly defined topic that invited reconsideration of the issues raised by the ‘material turn’ in the specific context of South-Eastern Europe. The conference was held on November 4 and 5, 2022, at the Rectorate of the University of Belgrade and the Faculty of Philosophy. Participants coming from Serbia, Croatia, Bulgaria, Italy, Greece, and the USA had the opportunity to share and discuss various methodological approaches in the research of artistically rendered objects and their agency. In addition to stimulating conversations, the scholarly meeting provided a space for the presentation of a large number of hitherto unknown and unpublished visual material, familiarizing experts with new discoveries in the field.

The conference was organized around six thematic sessions. The first in the sequence was titled “Artistic Patronage and Objects in Motion”. The papers discussed various ways of acquiring liturgical objects and the complex road network in connection with the mechanisms of patronage that supplied the churches with precious silverware. Mateja Jerman presented examples from Istria and the Kvarner Bay, contextualizing the circumstances of their commissioning as well as

* The topics raised by this conference are the focus of international academic and scholarly attention. The Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium, launched the largest and currently most comprehensive Western European project on the subject of sacred objects and material culture (Projet Brain-be “Belgian Research Action through Interdisciplinary Networks - Ornamenta sacra. Iconological study of the liturgical heritage from the Southern Netherlands (1400- 1700)”, under the guidance of Professor Ralph Dekoninck. The conference Southeast European Silversmithing is an effort not only to implement and adapt the most recent research and scholarly insights into a broader understanding of the dynamics of Southeast European history but also to mark Belgrade University as the regional initiator of this research.



the developed contacts with centers such as Venice, Vienna, Augsburg, and Graz. On the other hand, Snježana Orlović emphasized the interconnectedness of the two dioceses (Dalmatian and Gornjokarlovac Bishopsrics) by looking into the routes between centers where liturgical silver objects were rendered. She also stressed the role of previously unknown masters, such as Jakov from Topusko, in the development of visual culture during the 18th century. The second panel, “Imagery and Iconography”, prompted a discussion on the exchange of iconographic and pictorial motifs among different confessions. Thus, Georgi Parpulov’s presentation followed the history of a particular type of silver drinking cups whose visual corpus of representations remained unchanged from the late medieval period to the late Ottoman period, allowing adaptation of their function from the Christian to the Islamic context. Anita Paolicchi explained the political and historical factors that contributed to the acceptance of the iconographic solution of the apocalyptic content of the Lutheran Bible on the cover of an Orthodox gospel created for a Wallachian duke. Finally, as part of a joint presentation, Yannis Varalis and Constantine Dolmas introduced the participants to the preliminary results of extensive research on the gospel bindings created in the workshop at the village of Retziani in Thessaly, which are charac-

terized by numerous iconographic and stylistic peculiarities, pointing also to the materials and technological aspects of their production.

The thematic framework of the third session was “Materialization of Piety”. Francesca Stopper and Igljka Mishkova devoted their attention to sacred objects intended for direct communication with the divine. The first presentation focused on the analysis of formal and stylistic changes in the production of little-known reliquary busts and votive silver sculptures in Venice during the 17th and 18th centuries. The second paper focused on the silver votive gifts created on the territory of Bulgaria, revealing the long duration of certain pictorial forms that still appear today as the expression of popular piety.

The fourth session of the conference was titled “Function and Appearance”. Arijana Kopričina compiled a rich stylistic and morphological overview of objects and vessels from the second half of the 15th and the first half of the 16th centuries, presenting the characteristics typical for the goldsmithing in the area of the Zagreb Diocese. Lucian Lechintan interpreted the form of the Tismana censer through the lens of conscious integration of architectural elements from Byzantine and Western churches into a single whole. Lechintan explained the context of this precious object’s creation and linked the peculiarities of its form to the intention of visualizing Heavenly Jerusalem. In the end, Nona Petkova presented a group of objects executed in the technique of filigree enamel for the Bachkovo monastery. The origin of this group is linked to the silversmith workshops in the vicinity of Plovdiv, and filigree enamel decoration indicates integration of the principles of Ottoman aesthetics, especially in rendering ornaments.

The last day of the scholarly meeting was held at the Faculty of Philosophy and was opened by the fifth session under the title “Visual Communication and Senses”. Tera Lee Hedrick shed light on the role of sensory perception of late Byzantine chalices and cups in liturgical services and court ceremonies by inserting them into the discourse of power rather than viewing them through the division of sacred and secular objects. In contrast, Milena Ulčar showed the differences in visual language between anthropomorphic and non-anthropomorphic reliquaries of the early modern period that were employed in achieving the same goal - the creation of somatic triggers for corporeal, affective, and cognitive perception in the faithful viewers.

Finally, the sixth session, “Silversmithing Centers and the Creation of Visual Culture”, was the last panel of the conference and was dedicated to the presentation of new insights based on the archival material that dismantled the unfounded assumptions of traditional historiography. On the basis of newly discovered objects and written archival sources, Darina Boykina disputed the claim that silversmith centers in the territory of central and southern Bulgaria were being formed only at the end of the 18th century. Boykina showed that silversmithing in this area existed much earlier and was uninterrupted. On the other hand, Vuk Dautović presented the complex history of the Belgrade goldsmith guild in the 19th century, showing the active participation of its members in all contemporary artistic movements characteristic of Central Europe during that period. Dautović also argued about the existence of a developed national jewelry production in the 19th century, in contrast to the older interpretation that gave

priority to imports, leaving Serbian goldsmithing almost unexplored.

This scholarly gathering was concluded with a presentation by Dimitrije Tadić, head of the Desk Creative Europe Serbia, who informed the participants about the possibilities of future professional and institutional connection and cooperation within the framework of European programs and funds. In this way, the organizers offered an answer to a frequently asked question after the successful end of a conference: “What could we do next?”. Dr. Vuk Dautović (Department of History of Art, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade), Dr. Darina Boykina (Institute of Art Studies, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences), and Dr. Mateja Jerman (Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Rijeka, and Ministry of Culture and Media of the Republic of Croatia), being the conference organizers, gave a closing speech and promoted the future goals of the Society for the Study of Decorative Arts and Silversmithing and its main purpose of bringing together regional experts.

The international conference Southeast European Silversmithing provided the space for knowledge exchange and sharing expert experiences, as well as insights into the methodological apparatus and approaches in the research of material culture. The goal of the conference was to bring together scholars engaged in the study of liturgical and sacral silverware from the early modern period, whose comparative analyses can contribute to the study of this complex field by overcoming common research problems. The assembled visual material will be made available in a collection of papers. This will be the first publication in a series that is intended to fill in the gaps in the knowledge of goldsmithing in Southeast Europe, which is an indispensable part of its visual culture.

Information about this project, the conference program with a book of abstracts, and contacts of the organizers are all available at the following links:

southeasteuropeansilversmithing.wordpress.com
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