

Art

and

Politics
in the Modern Period



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Zagreb, 2019

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BETWEEN THE ARTS AND POLITICS: RITUAL CRADLE DONATION AND THE CASE OF THE FALSE PREGNANCY OF QUEEN DRAGA OBRENOVIĆ¹

Abstract

The famous 1787 portrait of Marie Antoinette with children and an empty cradle by Elisabeth Louise Vigée-Lebrun represents an example of visual manipulation in the service of dynastic propaganda. The image of the empty cradle is a reference to the Queen's late daughter, and thus it implies issues of politics, culture and gender in the late 18th century in which sentimental female education leads to the typical role of women within the reproductive process of the dynasty's sustainability. This canonical case indirectly refers to the situation that shook the Serbian monarchy at the turn of the 20th century. In 1900, a case of false pregnancy of Queen Draga Obrenović was revealed. The unpopular female ruler and the lineage without an heir created a highly tense environment in which the continuation of the dynastic family tree was taken as the only way to overcome the political instability. At the same time, the Queen sought to link her biological sex category to the social determination (gender) within the fixed cult of motherhood. The entire community was mobilized through donations of festive cradles to the ruling couple, which became a means of ritual exchange of goods between the monarchy and its subjects, as well as material evidence of dynastic continuity. In accordance with the rules of appropriateness, several of the received cradles were lavishly decorated, indicating symbolic importance of the artificial gift. The impressively decorated crib by esteemed painter Beta Vukanović stood out in particular. The painted angels suggest sentimental pietism of the period in which these heavenly beings were identified with children and thus suggesting a codified role of mother within a strictly standardized patriarchal society. Right after the official announcement concerning the Queen's unsuccessful pregnancy on May 18, 1901, the dynastic continuity of the Obrenovićs was brought into question. Having lost their values, the cradles became undesirable remnants of the past and were eventually destroyed, together with the other dynastic heritage, caused by the overthrow of the last Obrenovićs in 1903.

Keywords: Queen Draga Obrenović, monarchy, cradles, ritual gift, cult of the mother

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Since ancient times and the earliest human societies, the rites of rulers have been related to complex systems of ritual actions and symbolic practices. The concepts of charismatic leadership and court ceremonials were based on close interrelations among pomp, ceremony and power.² In terms of the representation of the ruler in the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period, the key issue of dynastic legitimacy and legality was the birth of the heir to the throne.³ The effectiveness of modernized royal ceremonials was based on the invention of tradition⁴ and its transplantation into wider circles of the public.⁵ In the fi-

¹This paper was written within the project Representation of Identity in Art and Verbal – Visual Culture of the Early Modern Period, funded by the Ministry of Science and Technology, Government of the Republic of Serbia, project number 177001.

²David Cannadine, "Introduction: Divine Rites of King," in *Rituals of Royalty. Power and Ceremonial in Traditional Societies*, eds. David Cannadine and Simon Price (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 1–19.

³Sergio Bertelli, *The King's Body. The Sacred Rituals of Power in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, trans. Robert Burr Litchfield (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania University Press, 2001), 147–157.

⁴Eric Hobsbawm, "Introduction: Inventing Traditions," in *The Invention of Tradition*, eds. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 5–26; Werner Telesko, *Das 19. Jahrhundert. Eine Epoche und ihre Medien* [19th Century. The Period and its Media] (Wien: Böhlau Verlag, 2010), 57–76.

⁵Andreas Gestrich, *Absolutismus und Öffentlichkeit. Politische Kommunikation in Deutschland zu Beginn des 18. Jahrhunderts* [Absolutism and the Public. Political Communication in Germany in the Early 18th Century] (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 2006), 103–126; Johannes Paulmann, *Pomp und Politik. Monarchenbegegnungen in Europa zwischen Ancien Régime und Erstem Weltkrieg* [Pomp and Politics. Monarchs' Encounters in Europe between Ancien Régime and the World War I] (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2000), 47–56.

nal years of the Early Modern Period, a number of participants (citizens) entered the public sphere and began consuming arts and rites that had once been granted exclusively to the rulers and closed court society.⁶

The birth of a male child, in particular, was considered clear evidence of a ruler's potency, which consequently manifested the vitality of an entire community. The birth of the heir to the throne implied the continuity of the ruling family, which symbolically guaranteed common peace and future prosperity. Sudden death or the inability to provide an heir to the throne could lead the state into the period of legal and social instability. The issue of the birth of an heir to the throne, along with a series of accompanying ceremonies, were indicators of broader power relations within the symbolic order of a community. The ability to ensure continuity of the royal lineage and to convince people of the ruler's potency shaped the future of the current monarch. The ruler's potency was the confirmation of his masculinity, which symbolically marked the whole society.⁷ The concept of family in the 19th century additionally emphasized the importance of providing an heir to the throne. It was the family that the citizenry understood as the nucleus of its code of ethics, and European monarchs were supposed to embody and follow this code.⁸

Ancient rites of exchanging power, as defined by Clifford Geertz,⁹ matched the pulse of public expectations occurring in new social circumstances. According to the theories of cultural anthropologists, gifts intended for a ruler were defined by the language of symbolic economy.¹⁰ They implied a new allocation of power in the social order of a community.

In modern European monarchies, the ritual gift given to the ruler has largely defined the relationship between the ruler and his (or occasionally her) subjects.¹¹ The power of complex large-scale ceremonies began to correspond to the everyday familial rituals of the dominant bourgeois class. During the 19th century, works of fine and applied art became part of the mass consumption of rulers' images and relics. This was especially true of royal cradles, such as the cradle of Crown Prince Louis-Napoleon (1856) and the cradle of Crown Prince Rudolf of Austria (1858). Within this system of representation, royal cradles were perceived as important communicative symbols between the royal house and public.¹² They formed an important aspect of the exhibiting practices (museum collections) of European monarchies.¹³ At the same time, royal cradles flooded public space via mass media, reinforcing the increasing public demand for mass consumption of royal images and relics.

Despite the desacralization of the monarchical system of rule in the late 19th century that resulted in the disappearance of royals' previously untouchable divine charisma, royal houses persisted on the basis of the mass consumption of royal images. This was more or less the framework within which the Serbian Monarchy functioned at the end of the 19th century. At this particular period, the complex self-representation of the Royal House of Obrenović had to function in constant balance between Austria-Hungary and Russia. Furthermore, the Obrenovići had to deal with permanent conflicts with their expelled opponents, the Karadorđevići.¹⁴

⁶ Hubertus Büschel, *Untertanenliebe. Der Kult um deutsche Monarchen 1790–1830* [The Cult of German Monarch 1790–1830] (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 2006), 23–45.

⁷ Bertelli, *The King's Body*, 196–209.

⁸ Rainer Schoch, *Das Herrscherbild in der Malerei des 19. Jahrhunderts* [The Image of the Ruler in 19th-century Painting] (München: Prestel Verlag, 1974), 24–56.

⁹ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Culture*, vol. 1–2 (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

¹⁰ Marcel Mauss, *Sociologie et Anthropologie* [Sociology and Anthropology] (Paris: Les Passes universitaires de France, 1968).

¹¹ Eva Giloi, *Monarchy, Myth, and Material Culture in Germany 1750–1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 1–22.

¹² The phenomenon of royal cradles conveys immense symbolic capital. It is especially evident in the case of the most influential European monarchy, so we will here use as an example a painting by Eugène Dévéria, "Birth of Henry IV at the Castle of Pau" (1827) that represents the arrival of a royal baby. Antoine de Bourbon, King of Navarre, raises his hands high above his head presenting the child to the assembled courtiers. The painting probably presents the ritual practice when presenting an heir for the first time. The luxurious cradle, made from the shell of an African turtle, became a cult relic that was compared symbolically with Christ's manger. It was a symbolic artefact of the ruler's representation and a proof of continuity of the royal lineage via the male line. Bertelli, *The King's Body*, 152–153.

¹³ The Hohenzollern Museum reserved a special place for the cradle of William I, a gift from his mother Queen Louise of Prussia in 1797. *Ibid.*, 233.

¹⁴ On the complex ideology and royal image of the Karadorđevići, see Tijana Borić, "Dinastičko-nacionalni pejzaž: vrtovi i parkovi Dvorskog kompleksa na Dedinju" [Dynastic-National Landscape: Gardens and Parks of the Dedinje Royal Palaces Complex], *Peristil*, no. 60 (2017): 87–102.



Fig. 1. Milan Jovanović, Wedding of King Alexander Obrenović and Queen Draga Obrenović, 1900, photograph, private ownership.

Finally, the monarchy was also challenged by struggles between constitutional forces and the authoritarian tendencies of the last representatives of the Obrenović dynasty.

The last decade of the 19th century proved to be turbulent for the young Serbian Monarchy headed by the House of Obrenović. The power of the dynasty, which had been founded in the early 19th century and which ruled Serbia throughout the century (aside from a few short interruptions), was questioned at the end of the century. In 1893, King Alexander Obrenović acceded to the Serbian throne. His controversial reign passed in the shadow of the powerful and dominant figure of former King Milan, and was marked by frequent clashes with unsatisfied figures from elite social spheres and institutions (the army, political parties, etc.). The situation grew worse due to the king's marriage to Draga Mašin (fig. 1). Their ostentatious wedding, held in July 1900, marked a new phase of instability for the Serbian Monarchy. The public did not approve of the King's choice of wife. The fact that she was a widow and, among other things, that she was significantly older than the King created controversies related to social, political and gender issues. Queen Draga fit into the 19th century stereotype of feminine evil, i.e. the *femme fatale*.¹⁵ In terms of her biological characteristics and sexual body,¹⁶ Queen Draga seemed to have emasculated the entire community.¹⁷ Finally, the queen's body was perceived beyond its physical characteristics as

¹⁵ Elizabeth K. Menon, *Evil by Design. The Creation and Marketing of the Femme Fatale* (Urbana: Chicago: The University of Illinois Press, 2006).

¹⁶ On the paradigmatic case of projecting sexual content onto the body of Marie Antoinette, see Lynn Hunt, "The Many Bodies of Marie-Antoinette: Political Pornography and the Problem of the Feminine in the French Revolution," in *Marie-Antoinette: Writings on the Body of a Queen*, ed. Dena Goodman (New York: Routledge, 2003), 117–138; Elizabeth Colwill, "Pass as Woman, Act Like a Man: Mari-Antoinette as Tribade in the Pornography of the French Revolution," in *Marie-Antoinette: Writings on the Body of a Queen*, ed. Dena Goodman (New York: Routledge, 2003), 139–170.

¹⁷ Menon, *Evil by Design*.



Fig. 2. Milan Jovanović, Queen Draga Obrenović, around 1900, subsequently colored photograph, private ownership.

a cultural and social entity defined according to the projections of dominant elites.¹⁸ From the perspective of society's patriarchal codes, the queen's dominant and seductive figure was perceived as destructive for the traditional state. The overall feminization of society in the last decades of the 19th century resulted in male anxiety. At the same time, the fetish of powerful women was part of the neurotic mood at the Fin-de-Siècle, resulting in the almost masochistic subordination of men to the new power of women.¹⁹ When the female body of Queen Draga threatened to become a political body, she had to face fierce public contempt that focused on numerous biological (natural) defects ascribed to her body. The queen's body was declared corrupt and immoral, and was described by a set of ostensibly bad feminine traits: as a harlot, a whore, etc.²⁰ Then again, she was also thought to have betrayed her "good female side" due to the fact that she could not provide the ruler with an heir to the throne. Her failure to fulfil her natural female role allowed her enemies to emphasize aspects of her biography such as the fact that she was ten years older than the king and that, in the years before she married him, she supposedly lived an extremely immoral life. Accused of debauchery and fornication, Queen Draga suffered the severe criticism of misogynists, even in public circles that were not exclusively male. The Queen met with the disapproval of the elite circles of Belgrade ladies who could not support the dizzying success of the new female ruler and her rapid ascent up the social ladder. Thus, they sought to impede the process of establishing the Queen within the social system of elite citizenry by continuously suggesting intrigues around her.

¹⁸ Bryan S. Turner, *The Body & Society. Explorations in Social Theory* (London: Sage Publications, 2008).

¹⁹ Suzanne R. Stewart, *Sublime Surrender. Male Masochism at the Fin-de-Siècle* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998).

²⁰ Ana Stolić, *Kraljica Draga Obrenović* [Queen Draga Obrenović] (Beograd: Zavod za udžbenike, 2009), 7–10.

The Queen was further accused of being a co-ruler on the Serbian throne (fig. 2), while her relationship with the young and somewhat reluctant monarch was characterized as that between a mother and her child in the cradle, both in domestic and foreign (especially Austrian) media.²¹ Additionally, from the very beginning of their dual reign, the royal couple faced major political challenges, including public demands for more decisive national action (vis-à-vis Macedonia, Bosnia, etc.), and Peter Karađorđević's incessant claims to the throne. Stability was needed. This is why the birth of an heir to the throne became a priority for the last members of the Obrenović family. Therefore, the reproductive potential of Queen Draga was put into the service of the restitution of the legal, physical and symbolic capital of the Obrenović Dynasty.

Finally, in May 1900, the couple announced the "wonderful" news of the Queen's pregnancy, which spread throughout the country, turning into the supreme media event of the year. The news was substantiated by famous foreign doctors, who dispelled any possible doubts arising from Queen Draga's advanced age. Suspicion was finally dispelled in July by the news of the Queen's pregnancy, personally endorsed by the court physician, Dr. Veličković, and the eminent Dr. Cole, a member of Parisian aristocracy.

The Queen's pregnancy deeply affected perceptions of her body. More recent theories point to an overflow of diverse bodies (natural, political, female) of European queens in the early and late modern periods.²² That is why, in spite of the diverse possible analyses of the female body, we have chosen to approach the body of Queen Draga from the perspective of the social and gender roles and logics of the late 19th century.²³

The position of a mother corresponded to the view of a woman's "natural" state, which made a social category (gender) directly dependant on a biological one (sex).²⁴ Hence, we might understand the Queen's urge for a child as an effect of an overarching model of femininity (motherhood) at the turn of the century.

In the context of scientific theories that substantiated the thesis of a *natural* gender distinction between male (normal and legal) and female (natural and free), Sigmund Freud's phallogocentric, largely misogynistic thesis on the emasculating desire of women stood out.²⁵ According to Freud, in order to compensate for her lack of phallus, over the course of her life, a female experiences the need to supplement the missing male genitals, and so she seeks to castrate her man in her blind desire. A castrated man becomes a hybrid being, which, through gender inversion, acquires the "naturalness" of a woman and her decadent weakness. This, in turn, would create a crisis in relation to royal familial relations, in particular: The ruler, meant to be a paradigm of masculinity, would remain in the sphere of childish sexual immaturity and thus make the entire community weak.

The only way for Queen Draga to overcome her public image as a severe female ruler who had feminized King Alexander was through the act of childbirth. If she had been a mother, Queen Draga could have regained respect by symbolically uniting the ruler's family and society.

The court of the last Obrenović was busy preparing for the big event. In addition to obtaining a special vessel for baptizing the new-born and acquiring great amounts of infant clothing, the highlight of the preparatory events was the ritual of cradle donation. Cradles have frequently played an important role within a communicative system of power and its transfer. The importance of cradles was confirmed by the famous portrait of Marie Antoinette with an empty cradle, a work by Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun from 1787.²⁶ This appealing image became the paradigm for the symbolic importance that cradles gained in mod-

²¹ Ibid., 164.

²² Regina Schulte, "Introduction: Conceptual Approaches to the Queen's Body," in *The Body of the Queen. Gender and Rule in the Courtly World 1500–2000* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2006), 1–19.

²³ Joan W. Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *The American Historical Review*, no. 5 (1986): 1053–1071.

²⁴ Sigfried Ruby, "Mutterkult und Femme Fatale. Frauenbilder" [The Cult of Motherhood and Femme Fatale. Images of Women], in *Geschichte der bildenden Kunst in Deutschland. Vom Biedermeier zum Impressionismus*, ed. Hubertus Kohle (München: Prestel Verlag, 2011), 511–512.

²⁵ Charles Bernheimer, *Decadent Subjects: The Idea of Decadence in Art, Literature, Philosophy, and Culture of the Fin de Siècle* (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 167–169.

²⁶ Marry D. Sheriff, "The Cradle is Empty: Élisabeth Vigée Lebrun, Marie Antoinette, and the Problem of Intention," in *Women, Art and the Politics of Identity in Eighteenth-Century Europe*, eds. Melissa Hyde and Jennifer Milam (Farnham: Ashgate, 1988), 164–187.

ern visual culture. Soon, many cradles began to arrive at the palace of the last Obrenović. Countless citizens and various associations prepared cradles as gifts for the royal couple. Each of the 43 cradles was a testament of loyalty to the crown and the Obrenović couple.

As part of the gift-giving ritual, the media gave special attention to the cradle from the citizens of the Požarevac District.²⁷ Contemporary periodicals (April 1, 1901) stated that the cradle was going to be publicly displayed during the Easter holidays. Indeed, the cradle was exhibited in the window of the Women's Society headquarters building on Knez Mihailova Street in Belgrade.²⁸ The display of the cradle in the capital's main street drew attention to the public, propagandistic character of the artefact. The choice of location, the Women's Society, highlighted the gendered character of the gift, which further emphasized the concept of motherhood in relation to Queen Draga.

The cradle donated by the citizens of the city Niš marked the peak of the gift-giving process. This precious gift came from a strong dynastic stronghold in the southeast of Serbia, where a cult surrounding the ruler's father, King Milan Obrenović, had been established during the last decades of the 19th century.²⁹ The daily newspaper *Stare male novine* (Little Old Newspapers) published an affirmative article that stressed the value of the cradle that was made in the factory of Ranko Godjevac. The author of the article emphasizes in particular the quality of the embroidery covering the cradle: "But in addition to the excellent manufacture of the cradle itself, our attention was also caught by beautiful and unusual embroidery and the coats of arms on the curtains, blanket and a little pillow. Everything is embroidered with pure gold thread, skilfully, tastefully and magnificently."³⁰ This goldwork was created by "hardworking Serbian hands," members of "the Women's Society's Craftsmanship School,"³¹ led by their teacher. Thus, an accent was put on the spirit of folk handicrafts, which further confirmed the role of the Obrenović Dynasty in relation to the nation as a whole, a theme regularly highlighted in the propaganda of final members of the dynasty.³² The newspaper article also confirmed the gendered division of labour in the late 19th century by emphasizing the value of women's industry, represented by the various aspects of manual work such as weaving and embroidery.

The cradle from Niš stood out due to its splendour (fig. 3). A reporter from *Stare male novine* provided a valuable description of the now lost cradle:

Svetozar Vljaković, a craftsman, received the order to make the cradle. The cradle will carry the image of the King. The Crown ... This crown is now here; it has been made in the city of Pirot by Dimitrije Petrović, a jeweller who was awarded a gold medal at the Paris Exhibition. The crown is in the form of an ellipse, all made out of silver. At the top, there is a gilded crown, and below it, there are wreaths made from acorns and oak leaves, also gold-plated. The area in between the wreaths is made out of fine silver tissue, filigree. Inside, there are two large and two small gilded stars, the same above and below. Additionally, the interior of the wreaths is made out of the silver ribbon that bears a gold inscription: To the House of HM King Alexander! Moreover, inside, there are two silver ribbons with the inscription: Obrenović 1901.³³

The snapshot by the court photographer Milan Jovanović probably depicts the cradle from Niš. Thus, together with the newspaper description, we can propose a verbal-visual recon-

²⁷ Stolić, *Kraljica Draga Obrenović*, 158–159.

²⁸ "Izložba kolevke" [Exhibition of the Cradle], *Večernje novosti*, April 1, 1901, 2.

²⁹ Igor Borozan, *Spomenik u hramu: memoria kralja Milana Obrenovića u Čurlini* [Monument in the Church: Memoria of King Milan in Čurlina] (Beograd: Filozofski fakultet, 2012), 29–62.

³⁰ "Nišavski dar" [The Gift from Nišava], *Stare male novine*, April 13, 1901, n.p., my translation.

³¹ Nenad Makuljević, *Umetnost i nacionalna ideja. Sistem evropske i srpske vizuelne kulture u službi nacije* [Art and National Idea in the 19th Century: System of European and Serbian Visual Culture in the Service of Nation] (Beograd: Filozofski fakultet, 2006), 137–142.

³² Igor Borozan, *Reprezentativna kultura i politička propaganda. Spomenik knezu Milošu u Negotinu* [Representative Culture and Political Propaganda: the Monument to Prince Miloš in Negotin] (Beograd: Filozofski fakultet, 2006), 162–165.

³³ "Nišavski dar", n.p., my translation.



Fig. 3. Milan Jovanoović, Ritual Cradle from Niš, 1901, photograph, Belgrade City Library.

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struction of the lost object. The description of the cradle points to contemporary trends in European art and design. The contribution of Svetozar Vlajković, a jeweller honoured at the 1900 Universal Exhibition in Paris, clearly connects the cradle to the cosmopolitan style of the time. The floral design of the cradle visibly suggests the influence of art nouveau, which was prominent in works of applied arts shown at the World Exhibition in Paris.³⁴ The shape of the cradle also indicates a preference for the transnational language of art nouveau. Despite variations within local communities, the unique language of art nouveau entailed the reunification of arts and crafts.³⁵ This, in turn, led to an ideological freedom which liberated artistic language from the reinterpretation of historical styles,³⁶ for instance, neo-rococo.³⁷ The use of natural and organic forms also points to the influence of art nouveau and the Parisian experience of Vlajković, who may have created the original design for the cradle. Different materials (silver, gold, etc.) produced synergistic effects with the dynamics of sinuous forms that the artist freely applied according to his imagination. Thus, the cradle was an example of applied arts made in the spirit of art nouveau, which reflected the turbulent, sensitive spirit of the late 19th century.³⁸ The refined elegance, organic form and overall femininity of the cradle clearly suggest that key aspects of art nouveau inspired its design.

³⁴ Debora L. Silverman, *Art Nouveau in Fin-de-Siècle France. Politics, Psychology and Style* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 172–315.

³⁵ Eva-Maria Orosz, “Kunstindustrie für den Luxusmarkt. Wienerkunstgewerbe um 1873” [Art Industry for the Market of Luxury Goods. Viennese Arts and Crafts around 1873], in *Experiment Metropole. 1873: Wien und die Weltausstellung*, eds. Wolfgang Kos and Ralph Gleis (Wien: Czernin Verlag, 2014), 174–181.

³⁶ Barbara Mundt, “Europäisches Kunstgewerbe des Historismus im 19. Jahrhundert” [European Arts and Crafts of the 19th-century Historicism] in *Der Traum vom Glück. Die Kunst des Historismus in Europa*, ed. Hermann Fillitz (Wien: Künstlerhaus Ges. m. B. H., 1996), 187–203.

³⁷ The Rococo Revival was especially popular in France during the second half of the 19th century. Rococo forms were recognized as part of the immanent French spirit which, eventually, spread to other parts of Europe. Robert Stalla, “... mit dem Lächeln des Rokoko... Neurokoko im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert” [... the Smile of the Rococo... Neo-rococo in the 19th and 20th centuries], in *Der Traum vom Glück*, 221–238.

³⁸ Silverman, *Art Nouveau in Fin-de-Siècle France*, 9.

Contemporary periodicals stated that master Kvirini had made “wonderful” curtains, a canopy, a little pillow, a mattress and a blanket to accompany the cradle.³⁹ The magnificence of the accessories was enhanced by the use of the embroidered gold and silver emblems and inscriptions. Special attention was given to the representation of acorn and oak wreaths. In the context of the House of Obrenović’s family history, these ancient symbols of abundance and power were meant to confirm the power of the ruling dynasty.

Another newspaper article stated that Beta Vukanović, a well-known female painter, contributed a painting of “a wonderful image of three little angels taking care of a new-born male child who had fallen asleep.”⁴⁰ This image was probably inserted later into the cradle. The images of angels symbolized divine protection over the future monarch. Central European Catholic pietism and European sentimental moralism influenced the opus of this painter with a German educational background. Vukanović, who had received basic lessons in art in Munich’s artistic and cultural circles of the late 19th century, used an indirect approach to anticipate the birth of the Crown Prince. After all, dynastic memorabilia with motifs of motherhood and childhood were distributed to the public in the form of appealing visual pamphlets throughout the 19th century.

Soon after it was displayed, the public was invited to engage with this unusual artefact. As it was exhibited in the workshop of Svetozar Vlajković,⁴¹ the splendid cradle became an important part of a series of events that should have reached their climax with the birth of the heir to the throne. Even though the cradle was exhibited for only one day (April 17), over two thousand people came to see it. The response was massive, especially considering that the workshop was located outside of central Belgrade, on Danube Street. After this short period during which the public could see the cradle, the object was delivered to the King as a gift at a formal gathering organized on April 18. It was probably on this occasion or in the period just afterward that the court photographer Milan Jovanović took his valuable snapshot. By composing an image defined by diffused light accompanied by a subtle interplay of bright and dark areas, Jovanović skilfully created an impressive visual experience that would remain in the memory of its viewers. Above all, the photograph transformed the cradle into a visual product intended for the mass consumption of the nation. The photo was undoubtedly intended for private homes, where it would serve as a miniature version of famous dynastic memorabilia.

Meanwhile, the Queen looked and behaved like a pregnant woman. But soon the entire process was interrupted. On May 18, 1901, the semi-official newspaper *Dnevnik* delivered the news of Queen Draga’s interrupted pregnancy, an event that had its own historical parallels.⁴² Later historiography and collective memory recorded this entire process as a case of false pregnancy. Doctors found that their colleagues who had carried out the earlier examinations had strong grounds for confirming the Queen’s pregnancy – by announcing this they exonerated both the Queen and their medical colleagues, to a certain extent. In any case, the claims of false pregnancy made the cradles irrelevant, and they were intentionally erased from the public sphere. Their disappearance might also be explained as a product of the royal couple’s need to expunge this unpleasant event from their own memory. At the same time, their obliteration from collective memory can also be explained by the devastation of the heritage of the Obrenović Dynasty following the murder of the royal couple.⁴³

After these unfortunate events, the popularity of the royal couple rapidly decreased. Queen Draga still managed to turn her pain and the loss of her child into visual representations in

³⁹ According to this source, the production cost for the cradle was 6000 dinars. It is not clear whether the amount only covered Kvirini’s decorations of Mr. or the overall cost of creating the cradle.

⁴⁰ “Nišavski dar”, n.p., my translation.

⁴¹ The fact that the cradle was exhibited in the workshop Svetozar Vlajković supports the supposition that the jeweller was its head designer.

⁴² The case of the false pregnancy of Queen Mary of England represents the most famous unrealized pregnancy in the history of modern European monarchies.

⁴³ King Alexander and Queen Draga were brutally murdered in the Royal Palace at Belgrade by a group of officers of the Serbian Army headed by captain Dragutin Dimitrijević Apis in 1903. The May Overthrow marked a grisly end to the Obrenović dynasty. Stolić, *Kraljica Draga Obrenović*, 199–202.



Fig. 4. Iconostasis, Church in Velika Krsna, 1901–1902. Photograph by Igor Borozan.

Fig. 5. Rafailo Momčilović, *Queen Draga Obrenović*, detail of the iconostasis, oil on canvas, Church in Velika Krsna, 1902. Photograph by Igor Borozan.

unusual ways. In 1901, the Queen ordered an iconostasis for the church of Velika Krsna, which was completed by the notable artist Rafailo Momčilović by the end of 1902 (fig. 4).⁴⁴ The painter used the image of Queen Draga for an unknown saint dressed in black, who represented the typical figure of *Mater Dolorosa* (Our Lady of Sorrows) (fig. 5). The Queen's dark silhouette visually represented maternal grief, thus confirming the ruler's emotional state after the unfortunate loss of her child. Even more interesting is an image of Queen Draga on the southern side doors of the iconostasis, where the figure of an angel, the Nourisher of Life, features her portrait (fig. 6). The image of the angel watching over small children suggests the Queen's need to express her love and affection for children. It fits within the general European framework of sentimental images of the Nourisher of Life (Guardian Angel), which the cult of motherhood and childhood helped spread throughout Europe.⁴⁵

In Central Europe, especially, the pathos of private devotion fuelled the popularity of these kinds of sentimental images. Hans Zatzka, an Austrian painter at the turn of the 19th century, created a range of variations on the theme of the Nourishing Angel who watches over children.⁴⁶ For the year 1899, the illustrated calendar *Golub* (Dove) published a version of a comforting angel watching over a cradle (fig. 7).⁴⁷ As this suggests, this typical motif of central European visual culture was introduced and accepted in Serbian art.

This image confirmed the turn-of-the-century concept of motherhood and sentimental devotion that affected the life of Queen Draga. From her perspective, it visualized the concept of a good mother. She is presented as a universal moral exemplar who has overcome her personal misfortune (false pregnancy). Finally, the Queen was visualized as the mother of all children (subjects) within her Kingdom. At the same time, this image could be interpreted as an apologetic visual statement used by the Queen in order to convince the public

⁴⁴ Uglješa Rajčević, *Slikar Rafailo (Georgije) Momčilović* [The Painter Rafailo (Georgije) Momčilović] (Beograd: Itaka, 1998), 18.

⁴⁵ After the suicide of the Austrian Crown Prince Rudolf in 1889, the media was filled with postcards of the Angel the Nourisher of Life featuring a portrait of Empress Elizabeth, which clearly underlined the sentimental relationship between the mother and her children who had passed away.

⁴⁶ The revitalization of Hans Zatzka was demonstrated by the exhibition *Hans Zatzka-Ein bedeutender Kunstmaler aus Breitensee* [Hans Zatzka – An Important Painter from Breitensee] at the Bezirk Museum in Penzing, Vienna, June 2010.

⁴⁷ *Golub*, no. 19 (1899): 297.



that her pregnancy had not been a matter of political manipulation. However, an isolated village church outside the mainstream of Serbian public opinion could hardly be understood as a space for Queen Draga's propaganda, and we can therefore interpret it as the semi-private act of a mother who was also a ruler.

The visualization of Queen Draga in the church of Velika Krsna completed the process of shaping public memory of her false pregnancy. The donated cradles found themselves at the centre of the royal couple's turbulent years and bore witness to the importance that visual, symbolic forms of communication had for the last Obrenovićs. The case of false pregnancy further shook the reputation of the royal couple and contributed to the extinction of the dynasty in 1903. The royal couple's lack of offspring was just an excuse for a radical expression of dissatisfaction among their adversaries. A decline in the economic fortunes of military officers after the death of King Milan Obrenović, King Alexander's father, followed by limitations on economic freedom and civil liberties, as well as impatience on the part of radical nationalists in relation to foreign policy – all of this led to the assassination of the ruling couple. At the same time, troubled relations with Austria-Hungary and the weak partnership with Russia contributed to feelings of isolation and anxiety that spread among the citizens of the Kingdom of Serbia. In an act unparalleled in the history of the region, the Serbian ruling couple was brutally murdered.

As both a ritualistic murder and rational "state" act, the assassination of the Serbian royal couple was an expression the hypersensitive social and political atmosphere of the Fin-de-Siècle. With no biological successor, the Obrenović Dynasty disappeared forever from the political and representative space of the Serbian state. The empty cradles made for the unborn heir to the throne shared the same destiny. Deprived of their primary meaning as imagined artefacts of dynastic power, these cradles became pure relics of the past that were eventually erased from the collective memory of the nation.

Fig. 6. Rafailo Momčilović, *Queen Draga as Guardian Angel*, detail of the iconostasis, oil on canvas, Church in Velika Krsna, 1902. Photograph by Igor Borozan.

Fig. 7. *Angel the Nourisher of Life*, illustration, *Golub*, no. 19 (1899): 299.

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