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Roman Fekonja, slikarstvo, realizem, portret, New York, Štajerska, pozabljeni umetniki

ABSTRACT

THE OPUS OF LJUTOMER’S NATIVE PAINTER ROMAN FEKONJA (1868–1910) IN THE LIGHT OF NEWSPAPER ARTICLES AND OTHER SOURCES

As a student of Heinrich Schwach (1829–1902), Ljutomer’s native painter Roman Fekonja (1868–1910) was a representative of Realism, the most prolific as a portrait painter. He belongs to the group of forgotten Styrian visual artists. After completing his education at the Provincial Academy of Drawing in Graz, he set out for the United States of America in 1892 but returned to his native town of Ljutomer in 1896. Later (1901), he travelled to New York again and married Josipina Kleinlercher from Domžale. In 1909, the couple visited their former homeland, after which Josipina refused to go back to New York with him. Consumed by loneliness, Fekonja took his own life in 1910.

KEY WORDS

Roman Fekonja, painting, Realism, portrait, New York, Styria, forgotten artists
The opus of Ljutomer’s native painter Roman Fekonja (1868–1910) in the light of newspaper articles and other sources

Roman Fekonja, the son of a smallholder Andrej Fekonja and Marija, née Kogel, was born on 22 December 1868 at Veličane near Svetinje. After attending a one-year rural school, he pursued his education in Ljutomer and Ptuj and completed it at the Provincial Drawing Academy in Graz in 1892. Given that he was described as one of the best and the most promising pupils of Heinrich Schwach (1892–1902), the director of the above-mentioned school, he did not study at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna under the mentorship of Professor Christian Griepenkerl (1839–1916) as maintained by earlier biographers.
all with the support of many fellow countrymen from the Slovenske Gorice hills, most notably Dr Franc Simonič. Simonič, among other things, enabled him to stay in Vienna for a short while and helped him find clients to commission his work, given that Fekonja, inspired by Academic Realism, primarily engaged in portrait painting. Still a pupil of the Ptuj Lower Secondary School in 1883, he painted a watercolour of Ptuj, and from 1885 his first known portrait (self-portrait?) has been preserved and is now kept by the Regional Museum Ptuj–Ormož. Quite a few portraits are known from his Graz period, most of which form part of private collections, and some have disappeared without a trace.

At the end of April 1892, Fekonja made his first journey to the United States of America on the invitation of his relatives. He settled in New York and then in 1894 set out for San Francisco, where an international exposition (Midwinter Fair 1894) was inaugurated in Golden Gate Park following the example of the global exposition held in Chicago (1893). Fekonja presented himself with Jožef Santner in the art pavilion with a pastel portrait of the United States media tycoon, businessman, and general director of the exposition, Michael H. de Young, which was donated in 1897 to what is now the Fine Arts Museum in San Francisco. The museum also keeps their other known portrait of Solomon G. Gump, the first art dealer on the United States Pacific coast.

In 1894, Fekonja’s studio in San Francisco burned to the ground, leaving him without possessions or a place to live. He returned to his relatives in New York, where he soon became one of the most sought-after portrait painters. Another major issue facing Fekonja and Santner was debt that they had incurred in San Francisco after Michael H. de Young refused to pay them for his portrait. The story became a major media sensation.

After the misfortunate turn of events, Fekonja returned to his native Ljutomer in the spring of 1896 or 1897. During that period or, more accurately, between 1896 and 1900, he produced a series of portraits systematically employing cold, dark, representative, and “official” tones, and he used the same vapid method in religious compositions painted for the Ljutomer parish church of St. John the Baptist. Most portraits from the Ljutomer period are in private hands.

Due to the lack of procurements at home, Fekonja returned to New York in 1901. His major supporter and admirer, Frank Sakser (1859–1937), enjoyed a great reputation and trust among Slovenian emigrants in the United States. Fekonja became intensively involved in the activities of the Slovenian emigrant community in Manhattan, where he also met his future wife Josipina Kleinlercher from Domžale. During that period, he painted a number of portraits, including that of his supporter Sakser. In 1906, the year that he obtained United States citizenship, Fekonja produced the historical Painting of the Manhattan Purchase (oil on canvas) and repeated the same motif in 1908, this time on the painting depicting Penn’s Treaty with the Indians at Shackamaxon. The paintings were clearly produced on commission, and Fekonja faithfully followed the original painted by the New York native Alfred Fredericks about 1902. For the purposes of Sakser’s company Frank Sakser Co., he painted its headquarters on 82 Cortlandt Street, New York. The colour painting was published on the wall calendar for 1909, issued by the Slovenian emigrant newspaper Glas Naroda for its subscribers. Also dated 1908 is the religious painting Christ on the Mount of Olives, which was bought by Sakser’s wife. However, as is true of most Fekonja’s works produced in the United States, its location is no longer known.

In 1909, Fekonja and his wife returned to their former homeland for a few months. At that time, he produced in Domžale a series of portraits of Josipina’s relatives, members of the Ladstätter family. His last known work is believed to be the genre painting Franciscans “playing judge”, which was bought in 1909 by Mihael Hočevar from Joliet, Illinois.

The year 1910 proved fateful for Fekonja after his wife refused to go back with him to the United States. Consumed by loneliness on returning to New York, he took his own life on 26 July 1910, in his apartment on the East 95th Street, at age forty-two.