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**Modernism and Modernity -  
(Im)Possibility for Historicizing**

Art in Bulgaria and Artistic Exchanges  
with Balkan Countries

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НАЦИОНАЛЕН



ФОНД  
КУЛТУРА

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## Content

Introduction.....	13
Historicizing Balkan Modernisms. The Bulgarian Condition .....	29
Women Artists and the Modernization of the Artistic Life in Bulgaria – Overcoming Boundaries .....	53
Polygraphy and Modern Style. Secession / Art Nouveau in Bulgaria .....	85
Chronology 1878–1918 .....	114
Artistic Exchanges with Balkan Countries during the First Half of XX century – Motivations .....	127
Bulgarian Art in the International Cultural Space. The Institutional Role of the Fine Arts Academy .....	147
The Exhibition of Seven Artists from Bulgaria in the Belgrade Critique (1933) .....	170
The Exhibition of Belgrade's <i>Oblik</i> Society in Sofia in 1934 .....	185
The Exhibition of “The New Artists” and “Zemlja” in Sofia, Belgrade, Zagreb and Lyublyana in the years 1934–1936 .....	203
Sofia – Athens: two exchanged exhibitions. The exhibitions of “Techni” in Sofia and of Bulgarian artists in Athens .....	225
Consulted Literature .....	236
Index .....	

## СКУЛТУРА

### Палавичини Пера

1. Глава	камен
2. Портре поч. К.	карарски мрамор
3. Дон Кихот	далматински камен
4. Седења девојка	датматински камен
5. Девојка	" "
6. Готска статуа	дрво
7. Статуета I	бронза
8. Статуета II	"
9. Глава	"
10. Девојка са луком	"
11. Мирис	"

### СТИЈОВИЌ РИСТО

12. Срамежљивост	растовина
13. Каријатида	крушковица
14. Орлић	растовина
15. Злата	дрво амарант
16. Зенић	карарски мрамор
17. Глава жене	абонос
18. Глава свештеника	дрво
19. Глава Кинеза	дрво
20. Акт	ораховина
21. Портре књижевлика Вељка Петровића	бронза
22. Лежећа акт	ораховина

Страница от каталога  
за изложбата на *Облик* в София, 1934.  
Page from the Catalogue  
for the *Oblik* Exhibition in Sofia, 1934.

18

## The Exhibition of Belgrade's *Oblik* Society in Sofia in 1934

The busiest Balkan contacts for the artistic circles in Sofia in the first half of the XX century were those with Belgrade, Zagreb and Lyubiana. What is important is the closeness of languages and cultures. The ease of overcoming the linguistic distinctions stimulated the artistic exchange at the beginning of the XX century. The first major manifestations were the creation of "*Lada*" Society and the four South Slavic exhibitions<sup>1</sup>. From a political point of view, they were linked with the "Yugoslavian" movement and the establishment of the idea of the common historical origin of the Croats and Serbs. The Yugoslavian idea triggered the coalition programme whose realization was the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenians after the First World War<sup>2</sup>. The cultural and artistic closeness at the beginning of the XX century was connected with the ideals of Pan-Slavism and the hegemonic attitude of Serbia to the "Southern Slavs".

After World War I, the beginning of the 1920's saw the establishment of contacts between the modernism-oriented circles around "*Vežni*" (Scale) magazine in Sofia and

“Zenit” (Zenith) magazine in Zagreb and Belgrade. Such an artistic exchange, due to personal activities and interests, is comparable to the internationalization of the modernist movements in Europe and North America. It is manifested in the publications and participation of Bulgarian artists in the international exhibition launched by “Zenit” (Zenith) in Belgrade in 1924.

In the 1930’s, especially between 1933 and 1938, the practice of exhibition exchange became very active<sup>3</sup>.

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In the 1930’s one of the joint manifestations of artists from Yugoslavia and Bulgaria was the exhibition of the “Oblik” (Form) Society from Belgrade, shown in January 1934 in the “Preslav” Hall in Sofia. In terms of its scale and significance, the exhibition can be compared to the exhibition of the seven Sofia artists in Belgrade in 1933. “Oblik” showed 70 paintings, 54 works in the Graphic Arts section, 22 sculptures and 21 pictures in the Architecture section, which were created by a total of 23 authors<sup>4</sup>. Some of the founders of “Oblik”, among whom was the painter Sava Šumanović, did not participate in the Sofia exhibition.

### The political moment

The political moment was always important when it comes to the artistic exchange in the Balkans but it seemed crucial in the 1930’s. The presentation of “Oblik” in Sofia fits well the period of intensive political and, linked with them, cultural contacts.

*“The exhibition was opened with a speech by the Yugoslavian Minister Plenipotentiary, Mr. Vukčević, who emphasized the importance of such visits for the friendly relations between the two nations. /.../*

*Last night, there was a gala performance in the National Opera House in honour of the guests and this night there will be a banquet in the Union Palace Hotel.”<sup>5</sup>*

The newspaper coverage clearly shows the officious frame.

The second issue of the new magazine “Zavet”<sup>6</sup> mentions the exhibition in its “Guests from the West” column. We learn that the presentation of “Oblik” – a society that unites “the extreme modernists” – fits well the intensive cultural relations, connected with the political situation at the time: *“It has been the third time since the visit of H.M. the Tsar in Belgrade that guests from the West have come here. Representatives and creators of arts visit us.”* The “Obilic” choir, consisting of 168 performers, gave a concert in the Military Club and 25 writ-

## АРХИТЕКТУРА

### Брашован Драгиша

1. Државна штампарија
2. Нова зграда „Политике“ - скица
3. Државни изложбени павиљон у Барселони
4. Музички павиљон Краљеве Гарде у Топчидеру

### Др. Дубови Јан

5. Евангелистичка Служба - Црква - Целиски Св. Никола
6. Зграда за становање др. Спасића Ј., Београд
7. Астрономска опсерваторија Беогр. Универзитета
8. Астрономска опсерваторија, главни улаз
9. Радионица Петра Јанковића, бравара, у Београду

### Злоковић Милан

10. Универзитетска деца клиника, у Београду
11. Универзитетска деца клиника, у Београду
12. Привредни дом, у Скопљу
13. Банкарски простор Београдске задруге
14. Хотелски хол Београдске задруге
15. Хотел „Жича“, у Матарушкој банји
16. Вила, у Београду
17. Вестибол за јавну грађевину

### Кojiћ Бранислав

18. Дечи дом, у Скопљу
19. Основна школа, у Земуну
20. Зграда за становање, у Београду
21. Студија за јавну грађевину, у Скопљу

19

Страница от каталога  
за изложбата на Облик в София, 1934.  
Page from the Catalogue  
for the Oblik Exhibition in Sofia, 1934.

ers from the Yugoslav PEN clubs in Belgrade, Zagreb and Lyublyana visited the Bulgarian PEN club. A declaration for mutual cooperation in the dissemination of works of fiction was signed.

Vladimir Vasilev presented in "Zlatorog" (Golden Horn) magazine an issue of "Srpski književni glasnik" (Serbian Literary Voice), dedicated to Bulgaria<sup>7</sup>, and thanked both the publishers and translators. Together with the literary works and criticism, the issue contained articles on art in Bulgaria – "Masters of Bulgarian Landscape" by Andrey Protich, "How Bulgarian Caricature Was Born" by Alexander Bozhinov and "Bulgarian Sculpture" by Nikola Mavrodinov.

In Europe, the differentiation between the modernist circles and the official representative art is clearer, at least until the mid 1930's. The modernist exchanges led to the internationalization of the movements and to the joint activities (exhibitions, magazines, etc.) beyond the framework of the state. It was on the official state level that collections of national arts were shown.

To my mind, the fact that in the event of exchange abroad were gathered collective national expositions rather than presentations of artistic societies and tendencies seems crucial for the artistic life in Bulgaria. Such were the Exhibition of Bulgarian artists in Prague in 1926, the Exhibition of the Seven in Belgrade in 1933 and the Exhibition of Bulgarian Artists in Athens in 1940.

As part of the same exchange during the 1930's, Belgrade's "Oblik" Society in 1934 and the "Techni" Society from Athens in 1936 were presented in Sofia. If compared with those of the other Balkan states, the societies from Sofia look less differentiated in terms of artistic tendencies. This seems a likely reason for the fact that they tend to unite for representative expositions.

In the practice of the artistic exchange, what makes an impression is the greater closedness of the cultural milieu in Sofia. There is a lack, for instance, of such a gesture on behalf of a periodical similar to the compilation of the Bulgarian issue by "Srpski književni glasnik". Only separate literary works were translated. Beside Branko Popović's<sup>8</sup> preface for the catalogue of the "Oblik" exhibition, there were no more Yugoslavian articles on the art in Belgrade and Zagreb to be published in Bulgarian. This could have been the result of deficient organization, but also a sign of the lack of curiosity as to the foreign.

I would like to mention what Asen Belkovski, an artist, briefly remarked in his article on the Japanese art exhibition in the Permanent Gallery in Sofia the same year (1934). That exhibition showed mainly woodcarvings (originals and reproductions) and a few items for household use from private collections. The biggest collection was the one of Zahari Kostov. Belkovski, who admired the woodcarvings' quality, exclaimed: "It is a pity that this exhibition remained relatively unnoticed in Bulgaria..." and also: "our audience, however, still does not like surprises. Art, especially the foreign one, is hard to perceive."<sup>9</sup>

Such an extreme generalization may breed suspicion. Which "foreign" does it imply? It is that very same milieu in the periphery of the modernization processes that constantly assimilates the centres' experience. When and under what conditions is "the foreign" perceived as a cultural and artistic model and when is it ignored? It seems to me that the answer

to these questions lies in the notion of “a cultural centre” relevant at that time and surrounding. The artistic phenomena, which were outside the “centres” according to that notion, were seen as marginal and were not commented on<sup>10</sup>.

### Critics' reception in Sofia

The exhibition of the Belgrade society “Oblik” in January 1934 in Sofia did not stir many critical responses.

Evdokiya Peteva<sup>11</sup> wrote a long article on the visiting exhibition. She defined “Oblik”'s members as modernists who were mainly oriented to the Paris artistic scene, who opposed not only the “*calm academism*” but also stood against “*the impressionism in France and Germany*”. Modernism, according to Peteva, is manifested in the understanding that the artist should achieve “*his own personal expression*” as well as in the artists' interest in their “*personal visions rather than in what we call objective and real*”, the interest in “*the subjective attitude and experience*”.

Modernism is defined as subjectivity, non-representation, non-mimetism. Thus, everything that happened with the artistic image after the Impressionism is described in a basically adequate but undifferentiated way. The text is representative of the best possible level of the perception of modernism in Sofia. The modernism is seen as an integral tendency, not differentiated as Expressionism, Constructivism, Surrealism, etc.

What is also indicative is the lack of comments about the architecture in the exhibition. The architects, members of “Oblik”, showed the modernist and functionalist tendency in Serbia<sup>12</sup>. Milan Zloković was the most prominent figure in the “Group of Architects of Modern Orientation”, founded in Belgrade in 1929. Dragiša Brašovan designed and completed buildings and urban ensembles in Belgrade and Novi Sad, which are perceived as samples of that tendency. Two other authors, Jan Dubovy and Bronislav Kojić, were also members of the Belgrade “Group of Architects of Modern Orientation”.

It seems that in the artistic circles in Bulgaria only the Secession / Art Nouveau tendency in architecture was perceived as an exponent of the artistic outlook. “*Suvremenno izkustvo*”<sup>13</sup> (Modern Art) society, which was

associated with that style, had as its members both artists and architects. However, after World War I in the period of the 1920's and 1930's, no more architects, interested in the mod-

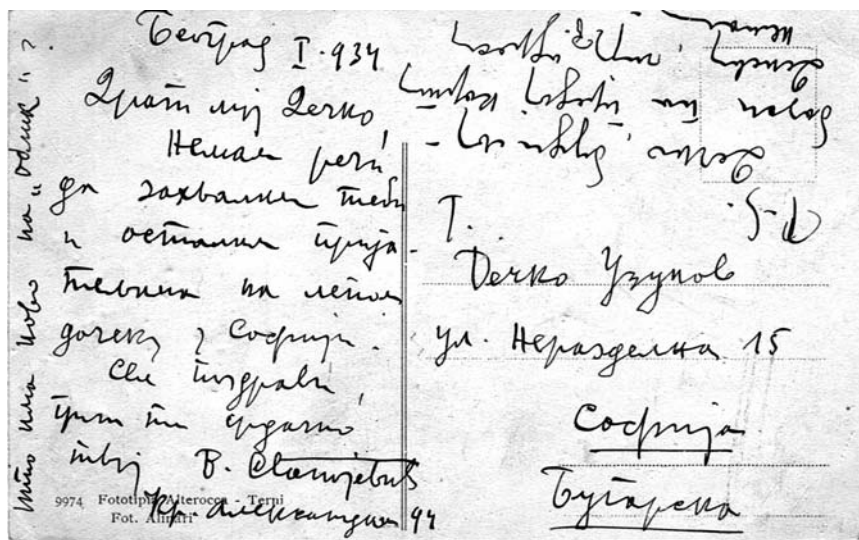


Michelangelo - Il Profeta Geremia  
Cappella Sistina - Palazzo Vaticano - Roma

Пощенска картичка, изпратена от Велико Станоевич до Дечко Узун, след изложбата на *Облик* в София. 1934, януари.

(Микеланджело. Пророк Йеремя, Сикстинска капела, Рим)  
Post-card, sent by Veljko Stanojevic to Dechko Uzunov, after the *Oblik* exhibition in Sofia. 1934, January.  
(Michelangelo, Prophet Hieremias, Sistine Chapel, Rome)

Пошенска картичка,  
изпратена от  
Велико Станојевич  
до Дечко Узунув,  
след изложбата  
на *Облик* в София.  
1934, януари.  
(гръб - Топли думи  
за посрещането  
в София, поздрави на  
колеги, на Борис  
Денев.)



Post-card, sent by Veljko Stanojević to Dechko Uzunov, after the *Oblik* exhibition in Sofia. 1934, January.  
(back site - Warm words concerning the reception in Sofia, best regards to colleagues, to Boris Denev.)

ernist tendencies, were present or presented their works in artists' societies. They were united in the "Society of Bulgarian Architects" that published "The Architect" magazine on a general professional not stylistically determined basis. Such a difference from the situation in Belgrade as well as in Zagreb<sup>14</sup> is also symptomatic of the non-differentiated interest in our country in the constructivist tendency, in the new objectivity. Just to confirm the eclectic fusion of views and circles, I would mention that "Hyperion" magazine, perceived as an exponent of Symbolism, published articles on modern architecture<sup>15</sup>.

### Possibilities for receptions today

Today, the painting of the "Oblik" artists seems to be an assimilated experience in the emancipation of the picture from the mimesis of nature; yet, still within the boundaries of the figurative. In this respect the artists from Belgrade are comparable with the central figures of the Bulgarian painting from the 1930's<sup>16</sup>.

The neoclassicist tendency in Yugoslavia became more distinct at the end of the 1920's. It was related to the interest in the objectivity: the representation of (wo)men in the classical genres of the portrait, the figurative composition, and the nude, as well as the object world in the still life and interior genres. These trends in Yugoslavia are comparable to the artistic tendencies in other centres in the Balkans, in Bulgaria or in Greece in the 1930's. The existence and omnipresence of such "conservative modernism"<sup>17</sup>, figurative and objective, in the Balkans is confirmed by pictures, sculptures and works of graphic arts, exhibited by the



“New Artists” from Sofia and other societies, such as the Athens “Techni” Group.

The artistic environment in which “Oblik” manifested itself, however, was more differentiated and diversified than the one in Bulgaria. In 1928 in Belgrade, the “*Zograf*” (Icon Painter) group was founded, whose conservative programme aimed at the restoration of the local, Balkan traditions in the spirit of the pre-academic art. At the same time, between 1929 and 1932, the Belgrade surrealism was at its height – the “*Nemoguće / l’Impossible*” almanac, “*Nadrealism danas i ovde*”, Dušan Matić’s collages, Vane Bor’s manifestations. Vane Živadinović Bor took part in the Surrealism movement in Paris and Belgrade with texts, collages, photographic and cinematic experiments. For him, the most successful experience of Surrealism was in the simulation of forms existing in imagination only. These forms could be created by various techniques. The photograms, which Bor began creating in 1929, are a direct exposure of objects on the photographic plate. This trend differs radically from the emancipation of the image from nature within the figurative<sup>18</sup>.

Thus, the “object” tendencies become “modern” compared to the traditionalism of “*Zograf*” and “conservative” if compared to Constructivism or Surrealism.

In Sofia, the comparisons can be made in one relationship only. That’s why the “object” tendencies are perceived as “extreme modernism” not only for Bulgarian art but also for the visiting foreign art.

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What are the works exhibited by the “Oblik” artists in Sofia? In terms of genres, these are still lifes, many landscapes, portraits, self-portraits, interiors and genre scenes in urban environment.

The architects participating in the exhibition showed photos and sketches of a hospital, an exhibition pavilion, a hotel, a state publishing house and a private house. In his article, Ješa Denegri draws the attention to the link between the functional and social essence of modern architecture. “The basic accents of the building practice are shifted from the separate representative and monumental buildings - symbols of the secular authority or clerical hierarchy – to the cheaper construction: residential buildings, new quarters, schools, hospitals, centres for tourism, sport and recreation. It is symptomatic that the most successful architectonic realizations are the small family houses.”<sup>19</sup>

In Bulgaria, the tendencies in architecture in the 1930’s were never displayed together with fine arts and they seemed difficult to be perceived as a common tendency. The responses to Constructivism, Functionalism and Neoclassicism in the public buildings did not seem to be perceived in a common style field together with the artistic image.

In “*Zavet*” magazine I can find some reproductions – Lazar Ličenoski’s “A Site from Galičnik”, Branko Popović’s “First Drawing” and Marino Tartalja’s “Drum-Player” (all of them are missing from the catalogue list of the exhibition). A number of Veljko Stanojević, Jovan Bijelić and Ignjat Job’s pictures are reproduced in the catalogue for the “Third Decade. Constructive Art”<sup>20</sup> Exhibition in 1967. Some of these pictures are familiar to me from the museums in Belgrade.

Veljko Stanojević, with his carefully modelled volumes in the spirit of Neoclassicism –

nudes, still lifes, and portraits – reminds me of some Bulgarian artists such as Kiril Tsonev and Boris Eliseev's works from the 1930's. While Stanojević acquired Neoclassicism through the French artistic circles, Tsonev did so through the German ones.

Ignjat Job painted genre scenes – figures in natural or urban surroundings, represented in the spirit of Naivism and united in groups by means of small plots. Naivism – both stylistic and plot one – was “educated”. Job studied at the Higher Fine Arts school in Zagreb and in the private school “Circolo Artistico” in Rome. If there is a Bulgarian painter with whom he can be compared, it is Naum Hadzhimladenov.

Jovan Bijelić's works are connected with the experience of Post Cezannism in terms of form and space, of Expressionism – in his treatment of colours and represent, in a broader sense, poetic realism at the end of the 1920's and the beginning of the 1930's. Some of his still lifes slightly remind me of David Perets, some children and female images are close to Bencho Obreshkov as a manner of painting.

Judging by my knowledge from museum exhibitions and reproductions, I can say that the artists from “Oblik” create figurative works that can be defined in terms of their style as Post Cezannist, having an accentuated objectivity, colour expressiveness, poetic realism and manifestations of “educated” naivism. In terms of genre, their works are rather classical. Their focus is the city and the modern urban life.

The pieces of art of the “Oblik” artists are comparable to Bulgarian artists' pictures from the 1930's in many respects. Some of these artists were members of the “New Artists”, others – of “The Independent” or “Native Art” societies. In Bulgaria, the interest in Post Cezannism, objectivity and realism in its broader sense with its colour expressiveness is not separated in a single artistic society. If we focus on a comparison with just the “New Artists”, we shall find in the Bulgarian society a number of authors and works that represent labour and social themes partly connected with the village. To a greater extent, these works are close to the programme of the “*Zemlya*” Group in Zagreb.

\* I thank sincerely all the colleagues and friends who contributed to the realization of this text: namely, Irina Subotić, Radmila Matić, Dragana Vranić, Ljiljana Sliepčanić and Gordana Stanišić, who were so kind to introduce me to the artistic collections and archives of the National Museum and the Contemporary Art Museum in Belgrade in a difficult period back in 1995;

Georgi Kaloyanov, who translated with enthusiasm important texts from Serbian and Croatian;

Angel Angelov, who translated from German Ješa Denegri's article, which is essential for the opinion shared above.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Cf.: South Slavic Artists Society “Lada”. Bulgarian Art at the South Slavic exhibitions 1904-1912. Catalogue. Author and editor Milena Georgieva. National History Museum, Sofia, 1994.

<sup>2</sup> On 1 December 1918, the Prince Regent Alexander proclaimed the united state of Serbians, Croatians and Slovenians in Belgrade. In 1929, the Kingdom of Yugoslavia was declared.

- <sup>3</sup> Cf.: Irina Subotić. "Back to Nature" Ideal: the "Oblik" Group. In: Bulgarian Artists Abroad. Thematic Issue, Ed. by Irina Genova, of *Art Studies Quarterly* (Sofia), 1999, N 2, 64 pages; Irina Genova. In the Mirror of Foreign Criticism. The Exhibition of the Seven in Belgrade in 1933. "Cultura" weekly, 1996, issue 34, p. 8.
- <sup>4</sup> The guests are: Stoyan Aralitsa, Jovan Bijelić, Vilko Getsan, Ignjat Job, Lazar Lićenovski, Ivan Lučev, Stanka Lučev Radonyić, Nikola Martinoski, Branko Popović, Veljko Stanojević, Svetislav Strala, Marino Tartalja, Anton Huter, Milenko Šerban, A. Balazh, Vladimir Zhedrinski, Pier Krizhanić, Pera Palavićini, and Risto Stijović; the architects Dragiša Brašovan, Jan Dubovi, Milan Zloković and Bronislav Kojić.
- <sup>5</sup> "Mir" newspaper, 1934, 7 January, issue 10047, p. 2.
- <sup>6</sup> "Zaveti" magazine, year I, 1934, issue 2, p. 21.
- <sup>7</sup> V. Vasilev. "Zlatorog" magazine, 1934, issue 6, p. 296-297.
- <sup>8</sup> Prof. Branko Popović. Contemporary Yugoslavian Art and "Oblik" (On the occasion of the opening of the Yugoslavian exhibition in Sofia). "Mir" newspaper, 1934, 6 January, issue 10046, p. 1.
- <sup>9</sup> Asen Belkovski. Two Exhibitions. "Zaveti" magazine, year I, 1934, issue 2, p. 30.
- <sup>10</sup> As an example I would suggest the acquisition of the Post Cezannist tendency by Bulgarian painting. I think that by the experience of the eye the exchange was much more intensive with neighbouring cultural territories, with Croats, Serbians, Slovenians and Greeks than with any movements in France or Cezanne's works. However, the criticism of the time said little about the Balkan artists from that movement whereas there was a celebration organized for the centennial anniversary of Cezanne's birthday.
- <sup>11</sup> E. Peteva. Yugoslavian Art Exhibition "Oblik". "Zlatorog" magazine, 1934, year XV, N 1, p. 42-45.
- <sup>12</sup> Cf.: Ješa Denegri. Der Internationale Stil in der Architektur des Balkans. In: Europa, Europa. Das Jahrhundert der Avantgarde in Mittel- und Osteuropa. Hrsg. Ryszard Stanislawski, Christoph Brockhaus. Bonn, 1994. Band 2, S. 41-45.
- <sup>13</sup> The society was formed in 1903 and was registered as a society in 1904 in Sofia.
- <sup>14</sup> The examples of the Constructivism and Functionalism centres in Europe are well known: Moscow in 1917-1923 with the groups around Tatlin and Rodchenko, as well as around Malevich, Gabo and Pevzner; Bauhaus in Weimar, Dessau and Berlin in 1919-1933; De Sijl – the Netherlands group and magazine in 1917-1928; the group around Strzeminski and Kobro in Lodz during the 1920's; the milieu around Moholy-Nagy and Kassak in Budapest and Vienna after 1916 and during the 1920's.
- <sup>15</sup> Alexander Obretenov's articles "The Spirit of Contemporary Architecture" and "Constructivism", both published in 1930, are such an example.
- <sup>16</sup> Steven Mansbach, a researcher from Washington – New York, defines "Oblik" as "a loose confederacy of conservative modernists". He situates the society amongst a group of newly established artistic organizations that stood against "Zenith", the social anarchy and esthetic radicalism of Ljubomir Micić. In: S. A. Mansbach. *Modern Art in Eastern Europe*. Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 232-233.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 233. S. Mansbach's book would greatly benefit from including material from Bulgaria and Greece.
- <sup>18</sup> See: Vane Bor. *Muzej savremene umetnosti*. Beograd, 1990. Texts by: Zoran Gavrić, Branko Aleksić, Miodrag B. Protić, Dejan Sretenović.
- <sup>19</sup> Ješa Denegri. *Ibid.*
- <sup>20</sup> Treća decenija. *Konstruktivno slikarstvo. Muzej savremene umetnosti*. Beograd, decembar 1967. *Koncepcija Miodrag B. Protić*.