

If Branko Ružić had been given the possibility to choose his patron in the Greek pantheon, I believe he would have chosen Kairos - the god of the opportune moment. For Ružić never approaches his work with a preconceived vision - he always explores, waits, challenges both himself and the seemingly unresponsive material, mostly wood, which is nevertheless almost always sufficiently alive to respond and reward his effort. Ružić always tests his initial idea and subjects it to the beneficial influence of play and improvisation: his work is the joint product of the sculptor's thought, captured matter and tamed chance.

In Ružić's world there is nothing Greek or classical. Few sculptors are so far from canon or proportion, from objectivist, deadened beauty or slow anthropomorphism. If he had to choose a patron, he would probably opt for an idol or totem in order to share his faith with "primitive" tribes and people unrestrained by civilization. He dislikes habit or inertia - he wants surprise and pure, original impressions. These he can create only if he wakes up the child that inhabits us, if he transcends habit and convention to reach suppressed, totally free behaviour.

Few artists in this country are as adventurous as Ružić. A man of experiment and inquiry rather than repetition and routine, he has imposed himself with sheer quantity and range. Where others discern, he readily points to, never fearing crudeness or imperfection. Nor is he afraid of recognizing ancestral spirits, challenging ancient masters. He is not afraid of "literariness", of metaphorical change of meaning, of an object found and transformed, or of great simplicity.

Ružić's hallmark in modern Croatian sculpture is a group in space, sculpture-architecture. Volume and mass are equally animated as the void, holes and crevices are not less expressive than limbs and solid elements. But in recent years, after having erected an entire city of such buildings, in which each building has a flexible place, he decided to try his hand again at individual specimens of humankind. His approach to the human face goes beyond traditional psychological categories, imprinted on the slack epidermis like on death masks, so that his portraits never betray the structural characteristics of his sculpture. They are witty and sometimes humorous emblems, unique and unrepeatable encounters of form and spirit, knowledge and matter, remembrance and existence.

Ružić is not naive, but he is elementary. The difference between naive and elementary is great; it is a matter of creed, not just a difference between two commitments in modern art. Speaking of commitments, we are primarily concerned with commitments arising from necessity. The naive artist accepts his condition whereas the modern artist, aware of the destiny of his language, tries to deny impossibilities at the current level of modern art. Ružić arrived at the elementary through the power of his own nature and through the persuasion - both persuasion and encouragement - of modern sculptures that were exploring the same problems as he was. So he set about rendering images in heavy logs of wood, figures that remain inert in the hollowed out bulk of bark-stripped configurations, whose dual and ambiguous nature has a muffled and suggestive effect.

Ružić's expression is not elementary only because of the crude rendering of his forms in wood, but also because those forms were inspired and evoked on an elementary level of consciousness. Like the signs of a world that is changing its skin before our eyes, they are satisfied with being ordinary. What is more: the more present they are in our life, the more habitual, the stronger the effect of sculptural transformation. Ružić in a single step of crucial creativity transforms man as an individual, or more often as a group of people, birds, other animals or even just an object, from the banal concrete and momentary to unexpectedly moving primacy. Momentary positions become states, in a new organizational syntax. In the compliant material of wood images are converted into proportions and relations of mass, the rhythm of full and hollow parts. And so his sculptures stand before us, presenting their simple message: that the fate of the modern spirit is expressed most sincerely in collision with basic and bared matter.

If Ružić made everything he could think of and was in addition to that a curious sculptor, then he must have remained completely unclear to the guardians of the truth who are so fond of embryonic sculptural stories stemming from the principle of centering and three-dimensional concentration. From the aspect of form (its expression), however, Ružić was difficult, if not impossible, to understand. His quick observations, momentary fanfares, primary carving, his uncaring attitude towards finish, and his desire to turn everything into a sculpture sounded too casual, if not blasphemous. From the aspect of a milieu that for a long time battled to cleanse itself of the Original Sin of Provincialism, Ružić's work was opposition to the stubborn concept of the statue that carries moral purport, so characteristic of communities of great and glorious forefathers and descendants.

In the first place - his themes were ordinary. They were close, intimate things for which no revolution was needed. He was a sculptor of revolutionary oxen or monkeys. Even pigs.

We must thus conclude: there are no great and small subjects, subjects that are more or less thankful, more or less fundamental. For him everything had the same importance.

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From the groves of Croatia comes Ružić bringing with him the freshness of the forest, the love of untamed nature.

The romantic wish to run away, which moves masses in search of lost equilibrium between man and soil, is completely foreign to Ružić who strips and shapes wood with the elementary simplicity of the expert, with knowledge gained through the life of generations. The skin of the sculptor hides the arch-master craftsman.

With proficiency he chooses aged logs with good growth rings, and readily turns them into square blocks from which strong and robust figures emerge. Ružić's is the kind of sculpture that is still catalogued as "folk art" on the edge of the hierarchy of critical judgement. His figures belong to the original vision type, they reject everything superfluous and "hit the gist" in the style of story-tellers, led by clear perception, supported by facts.

Faced by marble, Ružić immediately knew how to respond. He left the structure of the block untouched, just opening a window-hole here and there, to break up the volume and mass. He switched from wood to stone with ease and the natural grace of one who loves his work. With hammer and chisel he drew out a shape which here, too, has the character of his well-known, unpolished wooden sculptures.

Again Ružić is amazed, with the satisfied smile of a man of the earth who sees how his harvest grows and flourishes.

Giuseppe Marchiori, *Pagine di diario* (1966-1970)

A little over eight years ago the Tate Gallery mounted a large exhibition of modern art from Yugoslavia. This travelling exhibition was quite an eyeopener, as we in Western Europe were not aware at the time that significant work was being done in the Balkans.

Ever since Mestrović, sculpture has been a strong influence in Yugoslavia, part of the roots of this tradition being found in the work of the Dalmatian master, and the part in the continuing discipline of peasant wood-carving. So it is not surprising that the Balkan landscape should nurture such prominent artists as Radovani, Džamonja, Bakić and Branko Ružić.

The Circle Gallery is mounting, as the first exhibition in their new West End premises, a collection of the work of Branko Ružić. This artist, who won a *Bright Prize* at Venice in 1964., seems to me to be the most visionary, and perhaps the most profound artist of the group we have mentioned. He is himself an uncomplicated man who has retained the straightforward peasant quality of intimate contact with his environment. His sensuality and his intellect are in balance, the outer world that he inhabits is in harmony with the inner world of his own imagination and personality. As many artists do, he impresses order onto the objective world by creating symbols which have a deeply private significance, but which can be at the same time grasped in terms of a public iconography.

For instance, his typical fortress-like forms, reminiscent of a crenelated and moated city, are to a great extent dictated by the technique that he uses. Ružić exploits and is conditioned by the heavy chisels he prefers to use, he tends to arrive at his sort of form. But this figuration is more than a simple imagery 'conditioned' by materials; the suggestion of a fortified city implies the city or the castle as an archetypal symbol, an idea which obsessed the medieval mind, but which also still lies, awash, in the popular unconsciousness.

This type of double focus can also be noted in the large and important series devoted to 'Cézanne'; these massively carved heads constitute some of the most profound imaginary portraits of our time. In them Ružić is not only objectifying his feeling about the great painter, but he is also confronting us with a vivid and haunting image of the prophet and patriarch. He is objectifying for us the disturbing father figures we all carry around in our own minds. The ability to formulate symbols on this level partakes something of the primitive artist's ability to invest the world of the imagination with symbols and totems. Art here is perhaps being used almost as a tool; in the way that the primitive uses a stone axe to control his physical environment, so he uses symbols to 'control' his inner environment. Ružić's sculptures seem to contain something of this quality, not only Nature, but also the elusive and disturbing world of ideas is both rendered meaningful and tamed by the act of investing matter with presence.