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Ante Trstenjak's Sorbian women

The life's journey of Ante Trstenjak

Ante Trstenjak (29 December 1894, Slamnjak pri Ljutomeru – 4 December 1970, Maribor)

A brief outline of Trstenjak's vibrant life path is necessary to understand and place his Sorbian works in his highly diverse and considerable creative oeuvre.

Ante Trstenjak became aware of his interest in painting at an early age when he met with local painter Anton Čeh. From then on, he would not cease dreaming of a study that was unattainable in his family's domestic circumstances.¹ Nevertheless, he somehow managed to enrol in the School of Arts and Crafts in Graz with the help of a scholarship from the Styrian Provincial Committee in 1912. This was his first step towards proper painting. After being called up for military service and experiencing the World War I front, in which he was severely injured, he first continued his studies at the Arts and Crafts School in Graz, and then enrolled in the School of Arts and Crafts in Vienna in 1917, where he was admitted to the second year (drawing and painting dept., Profs. Ad. Böhm, A. Könnner). Following the break-up of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Trstenjak returned home. It was also the time of the national awakening of the Slavic peoples and Trstenjak was a great patriot all his life. In 1918, he joined the Maister's fighters and was wounded again. He continued his studies in the academic year 1918/19 in Zagreb, where he was admitted to the third year of painting (Profs. B. Csikoš, M. Crnčić, Lj. Babić, I. Kerdić). In 1920, he continued his studies at the Prague Academy (Profs. V. Hynais, Fr. Thiele) where he graduated in 1923. For three years, he lived in Prague with the painter Božidar Jakac, and it was Prague that most profoundly influenced him artistically. In 1921, he met Eugenia Heřmanová, a medical student and his future wife. After graduation, he returned home and in the same year already exhibited in Maribor. Using his small savings, he decided to leave for Paris in May 1924 with the intention to stay there for two months. Through the recommendation of the cultural attaché at the Yugoslav representation office, he received a French scholarship, which obliged him to enrol in the Academy of Fine Arts. He studied there in 1924. In the summer of the same year, he went to Brittany where, besides the countryside, women in national costumes captivated him. In 1925, he received a scholarship from the Yugoslav government, which again obliged him to enrol in university. He chose the Sorbonne and André Lhote's private academy. Together with Nikolaj Pirnat, he exhibited at the Galerie Carmine in Paris in 1925, and was also accepted to the distinguished *Salon*

¹ His father died in 1903 and the mother was left alone with five children.

d'Automne. At the end of 1925, he visited Italy (Pisa, Bologna, Padua, Florence, Rome, Venice) and produced many drawings and sketches. In 1927, he visited Paris for the second time, and in September of the following year, he made his first visit to the region of Lusatia. During his studies in Prague, in 1922, he saw an exhibition by Czech painter Ludvik Kuba, who showed depictions of Sorbian folk costumes.² Trstenjak visited Lusatia again in September 1929 and then in 1930, 1934³, 1966, and 1968. He made sketches and paintings only during his first visits (1928, 1929, and 1934), and no more later on. His first exhibition including Sorbian motifs took place in November 1929 in Budziszyn and later in Prague. In 1932, he moved permanently to Prague, where he set up a studio and became a member of the artists' forum *Umělecká beseda*, an association that brought together fine artists of different genres. In 1933, he married Eugenia Heřmanová, and in the following year their son Mirko was born.

Until the occupation of the Czech Republic in 1939, Trstenjak lived well and was known as a portrait painter. He often visited his homeland and regularly spent his vacations in the Adriatic. With the occupation, he joined the anti-fascist movement. He did not want to divorce his wife who was Jewish. Both were taken to different concentration camps at the end of 1944. With a great amount of luck, Trstenjak managed to escape a convoy of camp inmates and returned to Prague. His wife also survived the camp. After the war, the Yugoslav People's Front Assembly was formed in Prague, bringing together Yugoslav citizens in Prague, and Trstenjak assumed the position of its Vice President. When tensions against Yugoslavia began to emerge in 1948 during the time of the Cominform, Trstenjak would have to renounce his solidarity with Yugoslavia. Because he did not want to do so, his residence permit was not extended and he had to leave Prague. He moved to Maribor, where he had maintained a studio through all this time. His son joined him a year later, while his wife was only able to leave Czechoslovakia as late as in 1953. Trstenjak became involved in Maribor's artistic life and exhibited both independently and with the Fine Artists Society. He regularly visited his home region of Prlekija. In 1961, the series of monotypes entitled *Sorbian Women* was created in Maribor. Gouaches and watercolours dating back thirty years served him as drafts. In 1966, he again visited Prague and also Budziszyn. In the same year, the Maribor Art Gallery prepared a large retrospective exhibition of his work. Trstenjak died in 1970 in Maribor.

² Maja Vetrih, *Ante Trstenjak, Akademski slikar – življenje in delo* [Ante Trstenjak, Academic Painter – Life and Work], Pomurska založba, Murska Sobota 1998, p. 23.

³ *Ibid.*: The year 1934 is not mentioned by Maja Vetrih, but by Trstenjak. The date 17 March 1934 is also recorded on the drawing *Sorbian Women*, bearing the classmark R 9908, which is kept by the National Museum of Contemporary History of Slovenia in Ljubljana.

Trstenjak in Lusatia

During his studies in Prague, specifically in 1922, Ante Trstenjak saw an exhibition of the Czech painter Ludvik Kuba⁴, which among other motifs displayed those of Sorbian women from Lusatia. In an interview with the *Delo* newspaper in 1965, he commented on this: "In Prague, where I was studying, I saw an exhibition of Sorbian motifs by the Czech painter Ludvik Kuba. This was my first contact with Lusatia. And it aroused in me the desire to see the country and possibly paint some typical Lusatian motifs. At that time, a well-organised society called 'Adolf Černý', later the Society of Friends of Lusatia, was operating in Prague. The headquarters were in Prague, while many branches were scattered around the country. The society maintained close contacts with Lusatia and Sorbian students in Prague. I myself attended their events as well. [...] I embarked on the journey to Lusatia with the recommendations of Vladimír Zmeškal, a sincere friend of the Sorbs in Lusatia, and following the instructions of the then Sorbian students in Prague, especially Jurij Henčl and Jurij Cyž."⁵

When Trstenjak arrived in Lusatia (from Paris), he sketched and painted mainly outdoors, but above all wanted to paint girls and women in national costumes. He discussed the difficulties he encountered in the same interview: "I was in Lusatia for the first time in 1928, from August until the end of December⁶. I travelled the length and breadth of Upper and Lower Lusatia, by bus, train, bicycle, and on foot. At first, the locals were extremely distrustful, but when they learned that I was from Yugoslavia, they were very hospitable, especially in Upper Lusatia. Initially, I had problems with finding models as I wanted to paint girls in folk costumes. But things weren't going anywhere. It took a lot of effort and negotiation to get a girl to sit as a model, because back then there was a widespread superstition that a girl who sits as a model for a painter could not get married later. When Jurij Henčl persuaded his two sisters who were very beautiful to sit in front of my canvas, and the other girls saw the painting, they asked me themselves if I could paint them."⁷

Trstenjak said himself that he travelled the entire region of Lusatia back and forth. In another interview he reports: "I can say that all Sorbs know me, since during my work I walked through the entire region and there is probably no farm that I hadn't visited. Let me say that the farmers called me *knez moller* (mister painter, A/N) and

⁴ Ludvik Kuba (1863–1956) was a versatile artist: painter, musician, and collector of folk music traditions of the Slavic nations.

⁵ Tone Glavan, *Delo*, 31 October 1965.

⁶ More accurate seems the information from the book by Joseph Páta, *Deux peintres de la Lusace, Merčín Nowak, Ante Trstenjak*, published by Amies de la Pologne, Paris 1931, p. 40, where it is stated that Trstenjak came to Lusatia on 5 September 1928. He probably left Lusatia after 15 January 1929, since his exhibition took place in the House of Sorbs up until then.

⁷ Tone Glavan, *Delo*, 31 October 1965.

were going with their carts to Budziszyn, the centre of the Sorbs, to pick me up, and drove me to their homes and hosted feasts."⁸

"I painted about 30 images in Lusatia; most of them were images of Sorbian folk costumes and some of them were landscapes, mostly with motifs from Lower Lusatia, from Błótow (Spreewald, A/N). In addition, I made numerous sketches in Lusatia. Most of the time I was painting in the field, whereas sometimes I only made an on-site study, which I later completed in the studio."⁹

Trstenjak prepared an exhibition at the House of Sorbs in Budziszyn before leaving in 1928. He had further exhibitions with Sorbian motifs in Prague, Kraljevo, Graz, Maribor¹⁰, Osijek, and Zagreb.

The Lusatia series

In his home studio, probably still in Prague where he lived until the fall of 1950, Trstenjak continued painting the motifs of Sorbian women. An important source of information on this motif is the photo documentation at the Maribor Art Gallery (UGM) from the time when Trstenjak's retrospective exhibition was being prepared at the gallery in 1966¹¹, and the catalogue *Sorbian Women*¹² issued on the occasion of the eponymous exhibition at the Maribor Art Gallery in 1974. The catalogue lists eight oil paintings on canvas, dating from 1935 to 1940.¹³ All of them bear the title *Sorbian Woman* and all are privately owned (possibly the property of the artist's wife). Their present location remains unknown and no pictorial documentation of them is known to exist. I have come across only one privately owned oil painting¹⁴, which displays extremely hard modelling, atypical for Trstenjak. According to Dr Maja Vetrih, Trstenjak wanted to exhibit the series *Sorbian Women* in Maribor in his lifetime, but was probably too unwell to do so.¹⁵

Let us have a look at some prints with Lusatian motifs. An etching, which was owned by the artist during the preparation of his retrospective, is known from the UGM photo documentation. The inscription *Bridesmaid from Lower Lusatia* is written at its top right, and it is signed and dated 1950. The etching is characterised by a fairly

⁸ Vili Vuk, *Večer*, 12 August 1966, p. 2.

⁹ Tone Glavan, *Delo*, 31 October 1965.

¹⁰ Source: invitation from Ante Trstenjak's personal folder, UGM Documentation, *Exhibition of paintings from Lusatia (National Costumes and Landscapes)* took place at the Casino Hall from 19 April to 1 May 1931.

¹¹ The exhibition was curated by Dr Maja Vetrih and Andrej Ujčič.

¹² Curator Dr Maja Vetrih.

¹³ The date was most likely provided by Maja Vetrih.

¹⁴ At the time of the exhibition's preparation it was owned by the Festič Gallery in Maribor.

¹⁵ From the catalogue *Ante Trstenjak, Lužičanke* [Ante Trstenjak, Sorbian Women], Maribor Art Gallery, November–December 1974.

loose stroke and a contrasting background that emphasises certain brighter areas of the girl's costume. The second print follows the same pattern, except that the background behind the girl is black and that the *Bride from Lower Lusatia*, as it says in the inscription on the top right, is depicted by delicate strokes. The catalogue *Sorbian Women* identifies the technique as scraping on plastic sheet¹⁶. A downscaled image of the work was printed on the first page of the invitation for a group exhibition in Maribor in 1954.¹⁷

Along with the monotypes on which I will focus later, Trstenjak also produced a series of linocuts of Sorbian women, which was in his possession during the preparations of the 1966 retrospective and is known to us through the UGM photo documentation. Seven linocuts with the motif of Sorbian women and one motif entitled *Lužiški dudak (Lusatian Musician, A/N)* have been recorded. Some of the sheets are dated 1964–1965. Today, we can identify from this series a print kept by the Ante Trstenjak Gallery in Ljutomer and two prints from the Sorbian Museum in Budziszyn/Bautzen. In 1965, he created several other linocuts with figurative imagery. They are all defined by a distinctly restless stroke that gives the impression of trembling. It seems to attest to a decline in creative power and a rather ponderous hand. In the 1960s, Trstenjak's health problems increased, particularly with his heart. Because of a grenade fragment he had worn in his heart since he was injured in his twenties in World War I, he felt the consequences all his life and the problems have escalated in his old age. Maja Vetrih states in her monograph: "Trstenjak's diaries have become quite short after 1961, with the exception of the year 1962. He was apparently increasingly burdened by medical ailments."¹⁸

An interesting mention in relation to the Sorbian series can also be found in the interview with the artist by Dr Fran Šijanec in the *Nova obzorja* magazine. In his introduction to the interview, Šijanec says, among other things: "He has gained a reputation at home and abroad at numerous exhibitions, most notably as a landscape painter and painter of the rural folklore environment (Slovenske gorice, Czech Republic, Lusatia and the Sorbian costumes, to which the famous composition *Dressing of the Bride* refers, works relating to our classics of realism, such as Vesel, Kobilca, and Petkovšek)."¹⁹

¹⁶ From the catalogue *Ante Trstenjak, Lužičanke* [Ante Trstenjak, Sorbian Women], Maribor Art Gallery, November–December 1974, Index of exhibited works, no. 166.

¹⁷ It was the *Exhibition of Slovenian Painting and Sculpture in Maribor from 1918 to the Present*, organised by the Maribor Art Gallery and the Association of Slovenian Fine Artists. Next to Trstenjak's work, the invitation incorrectly states it is a woodblock print.

¹⁸ Maja Vetrih, *Ante Trstenjak, Akademski slikar – življenje in delo* [Ante Trstenjak, Academic Painter – Life and Work], Pomurska založba, Murska Sobota 1998, p. 26.

¹⁹ Dr Fran Šijanec, "Slikar Ante Trstenjak (obisk v ateljeju)" [Painter Ante Trstenjak (A Visit to the Studio)], *Nova obzorja* VI, 1953, p. 598.

Even though it remains unclear which work entitled *Dressing of the Bride* Fran Šijanec had in mind, I would assume that it is a painting because of the comparison he made with the classic Slovenian painters. The artist depicted several Sorbian brides on site, yet none of the known works shows the dressing of a bride. The only motif that might fit this title is depicted in an etching entitled *Sorbian Bride* (1950), which is known from the UGM photo documentation. At the time when it was recorded, the etching was owned by the artist, but its present location is unknown. It depicts a sitting girl with a large white collar, which is characteristic of the festive costumes of women in Lower Lusatia. Next to the girl stands an older woman with a white cap, who is arranging the girl's hair. The young woman is portrayed in an entirely casual short-sleeved dress, which seems like an undergarment worn before putting on a traditional wedding costume. Of course, the question immediately arises as to whether these women have allowed the artist to be present at such an intimate occasion. Boris Krajnc also mentions the work *Dressing of the Bride* in an article on Ante Trstenjak: "'Dressing of the Bride', for instance, is a picture of a joyless, dreary, pensive, and somewhat self-absorbed girl, who is being adorned by an older woman standing behind her. The bride is sitting—resigned to fate—with her hands in her lap. [...] But this bride is not a girl from anywhere, she is a type, she is a well-defined young Sorbian woman, who indeed is dressed in her national costume."²⁰ Boris Krajnc continues in the same article: "Trstenjak's best Sorbian paintings have been later collected by the Prague gallery of the Czechoslovak Society of Friends of Lusatia. These works were confiscated by the Germans upon their arrival in Prague and taken to an unknown location."²¹ So, this very painting is mentioned again. If Boris Krajnc wrote about it in 1951, we can conclude that it was still known at the time and was not related to the German confiscation. Today we can establish that we do not know of a similar motif, nor is it documented anywhere. The information on the German confiscation of Trstenjak's works does not appear elsewhere, which, however, does not question its credibility.

In addition to the motifs of Sorbian women, Trstenjak also made some watercolours of the Lusatian landscape, farmhouses, and villages, which in colour and style relate to his Parisian watercolour works. Eight watercolours with this topic are kept by the National Museum of Contemporary History of Slovenia in Ljubljana and one by the Maribor Art Gallery. Some watercolours from the Museum of Contemporary History have been incorrectly attributed to the Sorbian series. While researching the material it was discovered that in 1932, Trstenjak visited the territory of present-day Ukraine and depicted some farmhouses in the Carpathian region. Also, some drawings or watercolours of national costumes from the UGM Collection have been wrongly attributed to the Sorbian series. It turns out that the depicted women wear

²⁰ Boris Krajnc, *Nova Obzorja IV*, 1951, pp. 267–268.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 268.

the national costume of today's Ukraine, and this trip of Trstenjak was not known before. Among the paintings with motifs related to Lusatia, there is a particularly noteworthy excellent oil painting *Budziszyn* from the UGM Collection, which was probably created during Trstenjak's first or second visit (1928 or 1929), and which because of the plasticity of the houses and the soothing colours in terms of style approaches New Objectivity. Also known is a postcard with the same motif from the Sorbian Museum in Budziszyn/Bautzen. Upon careful observation, however, the appearance of small differences in the details leads me to the conclusion that these are two different images. The location of the original painting that was used for the postcard is presently unknown.

In the following, we will focus on the series of monotypes *Sorbian Women*, which represents the core of the present study.

The monotype technique

The monotype is the most painterly of the printing techniques. It allows spontaneous application without prior sketching. It is created by drawing or painting on a polished plate that does not absorb the material. This used to be a copper plate, the same material that was employed in etching. In contemporary art, the choice has expanded to other options: zinc, glass, or plexiglass plates. The image that is painted or drawn on the plate is printed onto paper by hand or by a printing press. Usually, only one unique print is created, hence the name monotype (mono = one)²². The ink used may be oil- or water-based. When printing with oil ink, the paper may be dry or moist, which will affect the resulting colour intensity and contrast. The ink can be applied in two ways. In the first, the ink is applied onto the plate in the same way as in painting, using various tools, such as brushes, spatulas, scrapers, sponges, etc. Another way is the reductive or subtractive mode. The artist first applies a darker base and then creates an image by wiping away or removing ink with the help of soft sponges, rags, brushes, silicone scrapers, and similar accessories. Because the paper's wood fibres need to soften, the painter slightly moistens the paper before printing.

Trstenjak used plain paper for his prints, which was probably not moistened. My feeling is that he used the paper he had in stock. In one case, he even used paper with an imprinted structure, which quite disturbs the overall appearance of the print (*Sorbian Woman 17*). He painted with oil paints. Often, oil residues are visible on the edges of the applied paint and on the back of the sheet, because the paper was too thin for the oil to absorb.

²² When printing, most of the paint is impressed on the paper. A second impression from the printing plate can sometimes be made, although of inferior quality.

The series of monotypes *Sorbian Women* from the UGM Collection

The Maribor Art Gallery holds twenty monotypes with the motif of Sorbian women. All Sorbian women are portrayed in classic poses. Only two of them are full-length portraits (*Sorbian Woman 10* and *16*), in the others the portrait ends above the knees or in a sitting position, so that it captures the lap. Essentially, the women sit in front of a darker background and only rarely stand. At the beginning of my research, it seemed that the studies for the monotypes have not been preserved, but by examining the material further, it was revealed that out of the twenty monotypes from the UGM Collection, twelve prints have corresponding watercolours or gouaches that were used as references for the monotypes. These works are today kept in several locations: five are in the National Museum in Prague, one is in the Ante Trstenjak Gallery in Ljutomer, one in the Maribor Art Gallery, and some are known from postcards kept by the Sorbian Museum in Budziszyn/Bautzen. In 1930, Trstenjak exhibited in the Czech town of Hradec Králové, and Sorbian students, who recognised the significance of Trstenjak's work, selected ten motifs to be printed on postcards.²³

In creating the Sorbian series of monotypes, Trstenjak certainly relied on the sketches and watercolours he made during his first three visits to Lusatia in 1928, 1929, and 1934. In an interview in 1965, Trstenjak said that along with about 30 images of national costumes and Lusatian landscapes he also made numerous sketches. Only two of these are preserved: a sketch from the National Museum of Contemporary History of Slovenia dated 17 March 1934 (classmark R 9908) and a sketch from the Maribor Art Gallery dated 29 September 1928. The black chalk drawing from the Museum of Contemporary History shows a fluent, relaxed stroke, which in few lines embraces both volume as well as specific details and the individualisation of the face. The girl wears a black cap that finishes with a giant bow at the back. It is a traditional costume of a Lusatian Catholic woman, a young, unmarried girl.²⁴ The sketch probably did not serve as a reference for the monotype, since it is more likely that the artist also made a watercolour or a gouache. Compared to the sketch, the monotype is less convincing. The young girl is set against an undefined background, the spatial quality is lost when compared to the sketch, and the relations between the white areas are inexplicit. In part, the poor result can be attributed to the poor quality of the paper, which makes it appear as if the colours have fused, while its edges show excess oil that the paper could not absorb. In addition, the paper has a striped grain, which is quite disturbing. We get the feeling that the painter used the first paper at hand.

²³ Joseph Páta: *Deux peintres de la Lusace, Merčín Nowak, Ante Trstenjak*, published by Amies de la Pologne, Paris 1931, p. 40.

²⁴ View of Ilona Bierling from the Sorbian Museum in Budziszyn/Bautzen.

Trstenjak used in his monotypes the dark and the white backgrounds in equal measure. He often created the same motif of a Sorbian woman on a white and a dark background. He used the dark background to effectively accentuate the contrasting whiteness of clothes and the opulent headgear. At no point is the background homogenous, as one side is usually brighter than the other or is gradually illuminated to create the impression of light coming into the room. From a technical point of view, the monotypes are characterised by very long strokes (especially in the background), which often overlap in different directions and gain a high degree of emancipation. All of these characteristics can also be observed in the depictions of Sorbian women by Ludvik Kuba, except that Kuba's works are more colourful and that they unquestionably manifest the influence of Impressionism in their treatment of light and colour as well as in the painterly stroke. Trstenjak was 31 years younger than Kuba. Even though he was in Paris in the mid-twenties—the cradle of modern art at the time—he was never really attracted to its currents.

He himself stated in an interview in 1936: "What do I want to say when I paint? I live out myself, express my perception of the world. First and foremost, this. I have no desire to bear the seal of a certain artistic trend or to be too restricted in my expression, meaning to maintain loyalty to some external forms by which everyone would immediately recognise me... When I paint, I am not thinking of style: do artists really have their mind set on this? [...] In my painterly belief, I am first and foremost a colourist: the colours are music to me, and harmony is my highest purpose. I am persistently looking for new expressions in colour."²⁵ Going on, he says: "Painting means the act of painting and the act of painting means composing colours and forms into a harmonious unity."²⁶

Taken as a whole, the series of monotypes varies considerably in execution and quality. It should be noted that the monotype technique does not allow for the result to be corrected or reworked. Its charm is in the combination of the painterly approach and the printing method that always contains an element of surprise. When examined, it turned out that Trstenjak created many images of the same motif for most of the Sorbian women. The differences are minimal, most of them relate to changes in the background or some kind of accessory (such as flowers in a vase). Only one Sorbian woman from the UGM Collection is embedded into a completely white background (*Sorbian Woman 5*). It is the youngest among the Sorbian women, a young girl in a traditional dress, an unmarried godmother or a bridesmaid from a town called Schleife.²⁷ It was my assumption that Trstenjak chose to place her on a white background because of her youth, but further research showed that the same

²⁵ B. Borko, Kulturni pregled, Slikar Ante Trstenjak [Cultural Review, The Painter Ante Trstenjak], *Jutro*, 16 November 1934, p. 3.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

²⁷ View of Ilona Bierling from the Sorbian Museum in Budziszyn/Bautzen.

motif also exists on a darker background.²⁸ As mentioned before, the monotypes vary considerably. The best ones (see, for example, *Sorbian Women 2, 11, 18, and 20*) possess a harmonious combination of colours, a balanced composition, a finely sensed attention to drapery and detail, and a transparent effect of the whole. The loose treatment of patterns and jewellery is particularly interesting. *Sorbian Woman 13* wears a luxurious necklace on her chest, which Trstenjak illustrates with tiny circles drawn into the paint, perhaps with the handle of the brush or with some other pointed object. This festive attire belongs to an unmarried godmother from Wochozy/Nochten, who typically wears a lace cap and a pearl necklace²⁹. The beautiful print *Sorbian Woman 11*, depicting a bride with opulent silver jewellery and a distinctive black headgear, also derives from the same town.³⁰ Trstenjak's classic choice of colours, as well as the harmony between the whole and the detail, are fully expressed also in this print.

Around 1928, Trstenjak painted a picture of his future wife, Eugenia Heřmanová. This is her only known portrait. Considering its clear contours, round shaped volumes and tamed colours, the portrait could be stylistically ascribed to the vicinity of New Objectivity. The bust portrait shows a confident young woman with a characteristic hairstyle of the 1920s. She is posing on the bed with her arms behind her head and her gaze fixed on the painter. She only wears an underdress or underwear. The portrait is very sensual. Trstenjak's Sorbian women from the same time are anything but that. They make eye contact with the artist only by exception, for the most part, they stare dead ahead, or are withdrawn into themselves. They usually hold a book. The painter is a foreigner and the Sorbian culture is traditional and self-contained. Religion also plays an important part. The traditional women's clothing that attracted Trstenjak to such an extent belongs to the rich clothing culture of the women. Sorbian women have at least six types of clothing that vary in shape, colour, and accessories suited to different occasions. In addition, clothes differ according to the religion³¹ and the place the girl or woman comes from. There is casual wear, church attire, unmarried godmother or bridesmaid gown, married godmother gown, wedding gown, and mourning garment (with a part-time mourning version)³². The dress is therefore a kind of a personal identifier that also reveals whether the woman is married or unmarried. As Trstenjak mentioned in the interview above, at first, no girl wanted to pose for him, because it was considered inappropriate. Even to such an extent that the girl might not be able to get married

²⁸ According to the UGM photo documentation, around the year 1966, one was owned by the artist and the other by a private person.

²⁹ View of Ilona Bierling from the Sorbian Museum in Budziszyn/Bautzen.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ The Sorbs are either Roman Catholics or Protestants.

³² Joseph Páta: *Deux peintres de la Lusace, Merčín Nowak, Ante Trstenjak*, published by Amies de la Pologne, Paris 1931, Introduction by M. De Vaux Phalipau, p. 10.

because of it. This reticence of women at that time and space is also reflected in Trstenjak's works.

Series *While Dressing*

A notable feature of Trstenjak's monotypes is his calm painterly approach and a great deal of improvisation, which is especially evident due to the large size of the prints' formats. The repetition of the same motifs of Sorbian women in several variants shows that the artist sought the optimal version and tested what works and what does not. He obviously did not discard the poorly executed prints (even those done on bad paper). A similarly loose approach in the treatment of figural motifs is already encountered in some of Trstenjak's works from around 1934, when he devoted himself to figurative motifs in various techniques (drawing, printmaking, watercolour, gouache, oil) in the series *While Dressing*. In the UGM Collection we keep a sketch, two watercolours, a gouache, and a print on this subject. In both watercolours, the figure is slightly outlined with brown colour, the clothing on the bed reveals an experienced hand, and the overall impression is conveyed by lightness and light. An interesting element is also the background, which is rendered in broad planes. It seems as if the work was created in a single swing. The artist convincingly maintained the necessary whiteness that makes a good watercolour breathe. The work reveals a master watercolourist. He might have transposed the lesson on the meaning of whiteness into the monotypes precisely from the experience with watercolours, even though they technically provide a completely different outcome. There is also a gouache entitled *While Dressing* from 1934 kept in the UGM Collection. The depicted figure looks the same, wearing the same underdress. However, there is a noticeable difference between the gouache and the two watercolours. The gouache looks bright and loose, but does not have this lighting effect; the chromaticity is noticeably less intense and the background confines the image a lot more. There is, however, soft modelling and an almost sketchy modernist approach, which is rare in Trstenjak's oeuvre.

A similar example is the gouache *Woman with a Cat*, also from 1934, from the UGM Collection. It may even show the same woman (although she has dark hair in the sketches and is blonde in the watercolour and the gouache). The gouache is unusually colourful; the placement of large colour planes side by side creates a cheerful image that comes very close to the modernist practices. Trstenjak is not composing the image with a line, but with wide colour surfaces, which is an exception in his oeuvre. Particularly interesting is the use of a semi-dry brush that allows colour to overlap. The emphasised and prolonged strokes of the brush are also a feature of the monotype series *Sorbian Women*, created nearly thirty years later. Interestingly, Trstenjak is much less relaxed in painting from the same time,

and maintains a firmer and more confined narrative. In watercolour and gouache, both of which were merely a complement to painting, Trstenjak seemed to transcend more easily the entrenched commandments and established concepts of the *métier*. It seems that the same applies to the thirty years older series *Sorbian Women* in the monotype technique.

Critics on the series *Sorbian Women*

Let us have a look at the critical response to Trstenjak's *Sorbian Women*.

Maja Vetrih published a monograph on Ante Trstenjak at the Pomurska založba publishing house in 1998, which is an abridged version of her doctoral thesis.³³ She was a curator at the Maribor Art Gallery, and from 1971 to 1980 also its director. She dealt with Ante Trstenjak's oeuvre before, and wrote at the exhibition of his *Sorbian Women* at the Maribor Art Gallery in 1974: " ...in the 1961 monotypes, the flickering light and the undulation of its sequences are reflected in the same way on the figure as on the background, thus creating a vibrant tension of the whole. The artist resorts to applying colours next to one another, which is clearly visible in his landscape oil paintings before 1930, and especially after 1950. As *métier*, these monotypes are among Trstenjak's highest achievements in this genre."³⁴

She is more eloquent in the monograph: "Regardless of the reviews that have been written about these works, it is necessary to remember that Trstenjak was primarily dedicated to recording the costumes, and less to solving his painterly problems, especially not when he was in Lusatia, i.e. in 1928 and 1929. He wanted to show as many costume details as possible, the variety and austerity of the colour choices, the differences between the costumes of Catholic and Evangelical women. In some pictures he even neglected the correct anatomy of the hands..."³⁵

"The monotypes of Sorbian women are interesting particularly in 1961, when he painted quite a few. The painting of Sorbian costumes spreads over a long period in Trstenjak's oeuvre, from 1928 to 1965. In the beginning, as we know, the documentary interest was at the forefront, later works of art were formed from these motifs too. He used to portray Sorbian women in various techniques (for example in oil, gouache, watercolour, mixed media, various types of print), with some drawings in between. After 1950, however, monotypes appear primarily on the subject of Sorbian women. In the early years of his painting of Sorbian women, tempera emphasises all the details of clothing and hard modelling prevails. At the

³³ She wrote her doctoral thesis in 1979–1980 and defended it in 1981 at the Faculty of Arts in Zagreb.

³⁴ November–December 1974, exhibition *Sorbian Women* at the Maribor Art Gallery, curator Maja Vetrih.

³⁵ Maja Vetrih, *Ante Trstenjak, Akademski slikar – življenje in delo* [Ante Trstenjak, Academic Painter – Life and Work], Pomurska založba, Murska Sobota 1998, p. 41.

same time, these works appear quite brisk, even though some seem as sketches, which they even are. The briskness is also reflected in the monotypes completed during this period. The Sorbian women are unusually buoyant and vibrant in colour for this time, in short, they represent an important achievement of Trstenjak."³⁶

To summarise Maja Vetrih's observations, I can say that I agree with the conclusion that in the technique of tempera or gouache a more rigid modelling prevails, whereas the monotypes appear fresh and joyful. I also agree that some of the monotypes seem as sketches and that in some places Trstenjak neglected the anatomy of the hands because of his interest in costumes. Quite telling is Maja Vetrih's sentence: "Regardless of the reviews that have been written about these works..."³⁷, which suggests some shortcomings and unfavourable reactions of the critics. Even though I found no negative responses in the documentation and the accessible articles, these criticisms could refer to the standardised as well as to the rigid and hard modelling of the Sorbian women in some watercolours or temperas (gouaches). Trstenjak proved to be a great watercolourist, and while some of his watercolours of Sorbian women are excellent (watercolour *Sorbian Woman* from the UGM Collection), there are also some works for which we might say that they are hard or rigid, and do not possess the characteristic sense of ease and transparency. They might have been intended as studies for something else from the very beginning and were created primarily as documentation. I therefore agree with Maja Vetrih, who says that in the works made on site, he primarily recorded the details of the costumes and was not solving painterly problems. A study of the material shows that Trstenjak closely followed these studies and captured both the posture and the face expression, as well as all the details of the costume. There are only a few discrepancies, such as an added bouquet or the position of the hands, while changes in colour are rare. The documentary side was therefore important to him. Even though the richness of textures, colours, and patterns was the focus of the monotype series, Trstenjak also technically emerges as a relaxed explorer of the new medium. The monotype technique is close to painting, yet, Trstenjak could not rely on his painterly experience when painting on glass. His descent into the new medium thus widely opened the door to a new approach, mainly to unburdened and free modelling, which is, in my opinion, also the attribute of his best monotypes.

Let us have a look at some reviews that offer a broader perspective on Trstenjak's oeuvre.

Art historian Janez Mesesnel wrote on the occasion of Trstenjak's exhibition of prints and watercolours at the Museum of Modern Art in Ljubljana (1967): "[...] And so it was more than understandable that he had cultivated a neutral style of painting

³⁶ Ibid., p. 47.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 41.

throughout his life that allowed for many variations, but he never steered away from the beaten path. This style is a somewhat picturesque record, often rich in terms of colour, with just the right amount of the quest for the atmospheric quality of a motif, sometimes even completely unobtrusively presenting a specific or general mood and the type of landscape. In some periods one can feel a tendency towards more vivid and more colourful currents, often already considered traditional and historical, such as to Impressionism and varieties of Post-Impressionism, at other times to hard expressionism fully restricted in colour, and then again to poetic realism and the like. In his programme, the interest in a particular landscape, country, or theme sometimes prevails—for example, in Lusatia and its folkloric wealth—which without noticeable or even unfavourable transition blends into further records of landscapes, cityscapes, and people of another country and of other cultural spheres."³⁸

A similar overall assessment is given by art historian Dr Fran Šijanec at Trstenjak's exhibition at the Small Gallery in Ljubljana in 1953, so well over ten years earlier: "Trstenjak is a painter of calm and discreet emotions, small and carefully used observations, which originate in the poetically experienced nature, the romantic experience of the motif... [...] There is nothing exciting in Trstenjak's works regarding the intellectualistic problems of painting that would go against the leisurely and conventionally designed painting composition. However, a joyful and genuine spirit of extremely sophisticated artistic adaptability, which results from a self-concluded maturation [...] and versatile technical skills (oil, watercolour, various painting and graphic techniques), is created in his works by their picturesque balance between the drawing and the colours."³⁹

We can agree with the above. The fact is that Trstenjak's oeuvre is very diverse, and during his studies and travels he alluded to many artistic trends of his time. However, he always returned to his own way of painting, which, above all, maintains a sense for the atmospheric qualities and the harmony of the whole. The reviews evidently indicate that the series of *Sorbian Women* in Trstenjak's oeuvre is known and respected in Slovenia, and that the critics acknowledged it as an integral part of the artist's creative oeuvre.

³⁸ Janez Mesesnel, "Poetični kozmopolit. Ob razstavi grafik in akvarelov A. Trstenjaka" [A Poetic Cosmopolitan. On the Occasion of the Exhibition of Prints and Watercolours by A. Trstenjak], *Delo*, 13 January 1967, p. 5.

³⁹ Dr Fran Šijanec, "Ante Trstenjak v Mali galeriji v Ljubljani" [Ante Trstenjak at the Small Gallery in Ljubljana], *Nova obzorja VI*, 1953, pp. 393–394.

Conclusion

Ante Trstenjak was perceived in Slovenia as a cosmopolitan, living in and moving around the major European centres, and nevertheless remaining strongly connected to the Slovenian land, especially to the native Prekmurje. After returning from Prague to Maribor, he became actively involved in the artistic life of the city. Art critics regarded him as a relevant artist, creating in his own kind of a neutral style, which from time to time touched on some of the major artistic currents of his time. He was primarily a painter, but was also involved in printmaking, watercolour, and drawing all along. Printmaking accompanied him throughout his creative life; he first encountered the monotype as late as around 1961, when he embarked on creating the extensive series of *Sorbian Women* in this technique. The watercolours and gouaches of Sorbian women, created on site in Lusatia (in 1928, 1929, and 1934), are primarily of documentary character, and not all of them achieve the same quality. The documentary aspect is also a major feature of the monotypes. Trstenjak strictly followed his studies (posture of the model, individualisation of the face, colour of the garment, details, and patterns), while approaching the new medium in a relaxed painterly way. He used a wide brush and extended the stroke considerably. Horizontal and vertical strokes often overlap and live a totally emancipated life. The backgrounds change from completely white to dark, or are only indicated by a few strokes. A similar liberation of the stroke may already be detected in the 1934 series *While Dressing*, which, however, does not signal any major influence or turn in Trstenjak's oeuvre, as the artist always naturally returned to his accustomed mode of painting. In technical terms, the best prints of Sorbian women follow the original documentary study, while also being much more: they are harmonious combinations of loose colour application and unique impressions. The influence of Ludvik Kuba seems especially identifiable in the treatment of the background, even though Trstenjak was in comparison to Kuba much more restrained in his colour palette. If the Sorbian women are modelled more rigidly in gouache, the best monotype prints appear fresh, translucent, and slightly ethereal. Trstenjak's *Sorbian Women* (unlike his usual portraits of women) are quite discreet, and the artist respected and maintained their reticence. His artistic interest was rather focused on the opulent and colourful costumes. The artist paid attention to the required balance of whitenesses, the contrast, and the composition, to create a coherent whole. He treated texture, lace, patterns, and jewellery with a refined skill. In some parts, it seems like he made the brush dance around freely. Sorbian women inspired Trstenjak from 1928 all the way to 1965, when the last series of linocuts on this subject was created.

His encounters with the major centres of art, such as Vienna, Prague, and Paris, did not mark a major turning point for Trstenjak, and the same holds true for Lusatia. The Sorbian series, spanning over thirty years of the artist's work, is naturally

embedded into Trstenjak's oeuvre, introducing calmness, effortless lightness, and a touch of modernism.