From the Editor

In Slovene Studies 1:1 (1979), 25-37, we were pleased to publish Mr. Peter Morrin's article "Some Remarks on Recent Ažbê Scholarship," which was based in large part on the extensive correspondence between Mr. Morrin and Dr. Rajko Ložar, the noted Slovene art historian who is now resident in the United States. Recently we received copies of this correspondence, revised slightly by the authors for publication purposes. Both because they contain important additional information on Ažbê, and because they illustrate quite dramatically the possibility of fruitful cooperation between specialists in Slovene studies in this country, we present the Ložar-Morrin letters here, with grateful acknowledgment to both authors for permitting us to publish them. The annotations are those of Dr. Ložar.

1Rajko Ložar holds a Ph.D. from the University of Vienna in Classical Archaeology, Art History, and Philosophy. For many years he was the Curator of Archaeology of the National Museum, Ljubljana, and then Director of the Museum of Ethnography, Ljubljana. He was also a member of the Board of Directors of the National Gallery of Art in Ljubljana, and wrote extensively for Yugoslav newspapers and periodicals. He has written many books and articles on art history, and served as judge on numerous art juries. Currently he is living in Wisconsin.

2Peter Morrin is the Curator of Twentieth Century Art at the High Museum of Art, Atlanta, GA. From 1974 to 1978 he was Director of the Vassar Art Gallery, Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, NY. He is the author of several articles, and editor of Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Drawings from the Art Museum, Princeton University (Princeton University Press, 1972). Currently he is completing his doctoral dissertation on Hans Hofmann at Princeton.
Peter Morrin to Rajko Ložar, November 16, 1978

Dear Professor Ložar,

Professor Lenček at Columbia University suggested that I write to you. I am currently preparing a doctoral dissertation on the German-American painter Hans Hofmann (1880-1966), focusing particularly on his influence as a teacher. Hofmann began teaching at his private painting school in Munich in 1915, and had an international following as a teacher during the 1920's: in 1930 he came to America, and taught first at the University of California at Berkeley, secondly at the Art Students' League, and finally at his own school in New York, which he opened in 1934 and continued to lead until 1958. He also led a summer school in Provincetown, Massachusetts. Historically Hofmann is important as a link between the first generation of modernists in Paris (where Hofmann lived and worked from 1905 to 1914), and the post-war abstract-expressionist school in New York. I believe it can be said without exaggeration that Hofmann was probably the most influential art teacher in America in the twentieth century.

In my research I have been eager to discover possible specific sources for Hofmann's pedagogical ideas. I suspect that Hofmann continued the traditions of Munich's many private painting schools. I have learned that Hofmann was a student in 1902 at the most prominent of those schools, that of the Slovene artist, Anton Ažbè. Ažbè is best known as the teacher of the Slovene Impressionists, but he also taught and was decisively influential in the artistic formation of the Blaue Reiter artists, Kandinsky, Jawlensky, and Werefkin.

It is my hypothesis that Hofmann transposed, or transvaluated, some of Ažbè's ideas in his own teaching. For example, Ažbè was well known for his reliance on "the principle of the sphere," the idea that anyone who could draw a sphere with its proper shading could use that form as a building block to represent in drawing any form in nature. Hofmann, who was influenced by the cubism of Braque and Picasso, insisted that his students translate their perceptions of the real, three-dimensional world into arrangements of flat planes in order to maintain the integrity of the picture surface. I am suggesting that in his teaching Hofmann in effect substituted a "principle of the plane" for Ažbè's "principle of the sphere." The pedagogical notion
of reducing the depiction of form to the manipulation of one geometric element, in my opinion, was probably derived from Ažbè.

There are other kinds of correspondence: in the 1920's, Hofmann taught his students to begin their art studies by drawing heads; this too was part of Ažbè's practice. Hofmann, like Ažbè, was concerned that his students see their studies as a whole, rather than concentrating on details; again, like his own teacher, Hofmann had his students pay particular attention to the direction of movement of a model's pose.

In more general terms, both teachers stressed the importance of the artist's trained and sensitive perception of nature, knowledge of the laws of color interaction, and painting techniques. Both paid scant attention to anatomy and composition per se. Both encouraged the use of a broad brush in painting and broad lines in drawing.

Coincidentally, Hofmann's Munich school was located at 40 Georgenstrasse in Munich, the same address as Ažbè's studio.

There are a number of questions arising from my study which I would like to ask you: I suspect that there is no one who can better judge the impact of Ažbè's teaching, in the context which is relevant to my study.

My first questions refer to the catalogue Anton Ažbè in njegova šola (Ljubljana: Narodna Galerija, 1962):

1. Do you believe that France Stelè was accurate in his generous assessment of Ažbè's progressiveness? Is it possible that an artist who was conservative in his own work should have embraced in his teaching an essentially post-impressionist or divisionist method? In his own painting Ažbè seems to have sought the illusion of fully rounded form, not form dissolved in color and light. Similarly, isn't it likely that there is no real correspondence, as Stelè argued, between Ažbè's "principle of the sphere" and Cézanne’s advice to treat nature "by the cylinder, the sphere, and the cone?" That is, Cézanne was really advocating a feeling of geometricity and a firmer compositional structure, not a return to academic illusionism: wasn't Ažbè's method simply a different approach to the achievement of three-dimensionality? In short, while Cézanne's
methods anticipate the planarity of cubism, any progressive simplification arising from Azbè's teaching would seem to be an unintentional by-product of his innovative pedagogical methods.

2. Azbè is compared to the Hungarian teacher Simon Hollosy in the Ljubljana catalogue. Hollosy was Azbè's principal competitor in Munich at the turn of the century, and their schools each had separate followings among the Eastern European art students. Hans Hofmann did not study with Hollosy, but he did study with two of Hollosy's followers, Károly Ferenczy and Béla Iványi-Grünwald, in Nagybana, Hungary. (There are interesting parallels between the rise of the Slovene Impressionists and the Nagybana School, both seemingly manifestations of romantic nationalism.) Hollosy lost the leadership of the Nagybana School because of his shortcomings in painting outdoors (Pleinairism). Although both Azbè and Hollosy advocated a direct and full-color transcription of nature, Azbè seems never to have even attempted to paint out-of-doors under the impact of bright sunlight. Why, then, was Azbè a more successful or more influential teacher?

3. Wasn't the impact of Azbè's insistence on the use of pure, unmixed colors delimited by the fact that his instruction was only offered indoors in the studio? Did he encourage the use of unmixed colors as a general practice, or only as a teaching exercise for young painters?

4. Did the practice of copying works of the old masters in Azbè's school differ from that practice as a conventional academic exercise?

5. What in your opinion was the importance of Azbè to the development of the Slovene Impressionists?

[...] I would be grateful for any assistance you could give me.

Yours sincerely,

(signed) Peter Morrin
Dear Mr. Morrin:

I received your inquiry about Anton Ažbe. It is interesting to see, in this case, that you are running into the same problem as I did many years ago. [...] 

In 1940, I wrote an article in the Art Magazine Umetnost (publisher and editor: Miha Maleš) entitled: "Mojstri slovenskega impresjonizma" (The Masters of Slovene Impressionism), pp. 163-177. In it I mentioned Ažbe's "Kugelprinzip," his emphasis on "the free-brush-stroke" and his admonishment to the students "to daub with vigor"—"schmier nur fest."

In addition to this, I wrote that Ažbe never came to the point of painting with pure colors or to the painting in "plain air." He remained faithful to studio painting, but achieved some very fine effects in the luminosity of his colors even in his interior compositions, such as the "Pevska vaja" (Choir Rehearsal) and others.

Not only his painting, his teaching, too, were determined by the past, not by his present or the future. Of our Slovene students of his, the three most important ones soon left the school: Rihard Jakopič, Matija Jama and Ivan Grohar, because they did not find at Ažbe's studio what they were looking for. Among the foreign students, Vasilij Kandinsky left first.

This irritated Ažbe considerably, so he commented on the three Slovene students: "All of them [are] very ingenious young men, but all of them "schmieren" [daub], each one in his own way." Only Matej Sternen and Ferdo Vesel remained to some degree with him and, following in his footsteps and converting technically Ažbe's philosophy to bright colors, created something like a Para-Impressionism. Ažbe stressed again and again that he was continuing what Janez Wolf, the main Slovene painter of the mid-nineteenth century, had done and that it was he, Ažbe, who was the heir of the artistic legacy of Wolf. This fact alone shows sufficiently that Ažbe's art was a daughter of the past.

The problem cropped up again while I was writing the introduction to the biographical novel on the painter Jože Petkovšek, authored by the late Marjan Marolt (Buenos Aires,
ca. 1974). Petkovšek (1861-1898) stopped for a short time at Ažbè's studio, but soon left because students made ridiculous remarks about his work. In this Introduction I took issue with repeated remarks by Prof. France Stelè, which imply that Ažbè's "Kugelprinzip" was of the same order as Cézanne's cube-, sphere-, cone- and cylinder-theory. Stelè was a very prolific art historian and critic, but he did not understand Cézanne and Cubist-Post-Impressionist Art.

In the Introduction I equated the Kugelprinzip to what Eduard Manet meant, when he answered Courbet's remarks on his (Manet's) figures:

Courbet: But, Monsieur Manet, your figures look like playing cards, don't they?

Manet: And your figures, Monsieur Courbet, look like billiard balls.

By the time of Ažbè's "Kugelprinzip," this principle, as you can see, had a long history in the story of painting.

I wish your work full success.

Sincerely,

(signed) R. Ložar

Now to your questions:

1. The answer to this is in the first part. I do not see any discrepancies between the art and the teaching of Ažbè. He did not return to an academic formula, instead he must be credited with freeing the old "glatt-malerei" and introducing the free-brush-stroke. He should not be compared or measured against the French Impressionism, but against the state of Central European Art of his times, particularly Munich.

2. I cannot say anything in reference to the Hungarians because I do not have the Ažbè Catalog at hand. If Ažbè had success, it was due primarily to his stronger personality as an artist and as a teacher. And he was strong and popular, his social and artistic connections with the Simplicissimus Magazine and Cabaret prove this.
3. Do not know exactly about the mode of using unmixed colors and in my opinion this is not important. The fact is, that even if he was using unmixed colors and teaching this, this has nothing to do with, e.g., French Pointillism. In this way, Jurij Šubic (1855-1890), who had studied in Paris but was dead by the time Ažbè started, was far advanced in "the use of the Impressionist-Palette," so the line is this:

1. Jurij Šubic—Slovene impressionists

4. Did not.

No matter what I have said here, you must see all these matters for yourself because painting is a visual art, not a correspondence. You are in a privileged position of being young and knowing how much better we can understand all Post-Impressionist Art now, after all these International Exhibits. The Art Institute of Milwaukee was running a show: The Munich School and American Realism. I missed it, unfortunately.

In a retrospective exhibit of H. Hofmann, I remember my disappointment in seeing his early work quite "unmodern." I shall check now the catalogs of his opus.

I suggest that you turn this correspondence of ours over to Prof. Lenček for publication in the Newsletter of the "Society for Slovene Studies"—because it is the first time that an American comes so close to Slovene art in an international perspective (Hofmann). This correspondence would make educational reading and show what the SSS Newsletter could and should do in addition to the fields covered usually.

R.L.
Peter Morrin to Rajko Ložar, November 28, 1978

Dear Professor Ložar,

I am very grateful to you for your kind and very thorough response to my letter. I have enclosed a photocopy of one of my major sources on Ažbè, which I am sure will interest you. It is the second chapter of a doctoral dissertation by Peg Weiss, Wassily Kandinsky: The Formative Munich Years (1896-1914): From Jugendstil to Abstraction. (Syracuse University, 1973). While I admire Dr. Weiss's thoroughness, I now believe that she has been too ready in her acceptance of the assessment of Ažbè offered in the catalogue, Anton Ažbè in njegova šola, although she takes significant exception to Stele's suggestion that Ažbè advocated theories of "optical mixture." Aided by your comments and by the statements in Cézanne: The Late Work (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1977), I now think that linking the names of Ažbè and Cézanne is a misunderstanding of the contributions of both men. Whatever Ažbè had to offer, it seems to me, lay in his corrections of students' work, and in the freedom he apparently offered his pupils.

I am still investigating the possibility that Hofmann was inspired by Ažbè, but I am now inclined to believe that that inspiration was of a personal, rather than an intellectual or theoretical nature. It also seems possible that in the disjuncture between Ažbè's statements and his practice, his students may have been prepared for an art which went beyond the possibilities offered in Ažbè's studio. That is, insofar as Ažbè's teaching did not fulfill the goals enunciated for it, Ažbè's former students may have been psychologically prepared to seek out an art which could fulfill those goals.

Your letter also brought something else to my mind: virtually all our accounts of Ažbè's teaching are reminiscences of former students. There are no primary sources. In stressing Ažbè's progressiveness, his former students undoubtedly were writing with a hindsight influenced by subsequent developments. An eagerness to shed reflected glory upon oneself by emphasizing the progressiveness of one's teacher is a universal (and forgivable) trait.

You are quite right that Hofmann was surprisingly conservative in his early works. Hofmann was a thoroughgoing eclectic, who learned most from the concerns of his own
students. He also came to artistic maturity very slowly: his memorable painting was done between his 75th year, and his death at the age of 86. While his pedagogy was essentially a formulation of Paris studio talk he heard between 1905 and 1914 (and which was still new and fresh to American art students in the 1920's, '30s and '40s), I suspect that his method of presenting and inculcating that teaching may owe something to his experiences in the private art schools of Munich (including Ažbe's) in the years prior to 1905. Dr. Wolf Dube, an authority on German expressionism, remarked to me that the private art schools were always freer than the Munich Academy, and while nominally they offered preparation for the Academy's entrance exams, in fact they often served as a kind of alternative. It was always harder for a non-German to gain entrance to the Academy than for a native-born German, and aside from certain celebrated teachers like Franz von Stuck, the instruction there was not very inspiring.

I would be grateful for any comments you may wish to make on Dr. Weiss's chapter.

I thank you again for your generosity with your time, and your willingness to impart your extensive knowledge on this subject. I have taken to heart your advice to me to use my eyes and not my typewriter in coming to a judgment on these matters.

Yours sincerely,

(signed) Peter Morrin

Rajko Ložar to Peter Morrin, December 4, 1978

Dear Mr. Morrin,

I am confirming the receipt of your letter of November 28 and of the xerox-copy showing Chapters I-II of Miss Weiss' Study on Kandinsky. Thanks a lot for both things.

Reading the first chapter on Kandinsky's first teacher, I can now understand better your predicament in assessing the right meaning of Ažbe's "Kugelprinzip" and the right consequences of (1) Ažbe's teaching and (2) Stelè's interpretations.
All this is a very interesting case not only from the point of view of Art Criticism and History, but also in that it puts to shame the entire Slovene community of students in the universities who just do not care for our cultural heritage, nor do they have any interest in humanistic studies.

Between the position you have taken and the one of Miss Weiss there seems to be a difference, at least to me, in the verbatim interpretation of that unfortunate passage. As I understand, Miss Weiss takes Stelè's dictum as it is, while you are reluctant to do this.

My position is the one I have outlined to you in my previous letter. However today I should emphasize that while I am rejecting the idea that Ažbè's respective theory was a forerunner of Cézanne's theory in general and that of Cubism in particular, the road must be kept open for other potential stimuli in Ažbè's teaching and painting, which were inherent in them and germinated later in the art works of his apostatic students, such as Kandinsky or Hofmann.

Ažbè's stress on color as the only appropriate instrument of modeling a form in space must be understood in the context of the entire European art situation of those times. Until the middle of the nineteenth century the foundations of all the painting business were drawings, and Janez Šubic (1850-1889), the older brother of Jurij, made for a single panel of St. Martin ca. 20 master-drawings, not including studies for details, such as hands, and parts of draperies. As far as I know, Ažbè didn't make a single drawing which could be considered as the preliminary stage for the execution of the subject in color, i.e. in painting. For him the drawing was the job of the brush and of the paint used in applying the colors. This idea was new and required some relaxation in terms of relaying it to the student and here "das Kugelprinzip" comes in. If you can paint a "Kugel," you can paint a head. But not for Cézanne or the Cubist. For these two, the problem was not how to paint a head according to a "Kugel" or ball, but what is the head in the first place.

If painting a head like a "Kugel" were the method of Cézanne, how come that the heads he painted were such square, clumsy figures? Compare with them the head of the negroid wife of the American Consul in Munich by Ažbè, and judge for yourself. My conclusion is: Ažbè's emphasis on color was
the outgrowth of the absolutely painterly thinking of his, he was a painter, ein Maler, and his style was painterly, authentically "malerisch."

This is a distinction which eludes most American students of European Art, because they have a way of cataract thinking: here Realism--there Impressionism, and nothing in between.

As a Frenchman, Cézanne was a genuine Platonist in the House of Painting. Later on, we find the Britisher Francis Bacon and his human figures. Bacon could never figure out what exactly a human figure was, how do you go about making a portrait of it. The same problem afflicted the German sculptor Wilhelm Lehmbruck and the Swiss guy Alberto Giacometti. Miss Weiss would do good to forget about all those statements and go to the paintings themselves, and this applies also to your work.

Ažbè's free and vigorous brush stroke was probably very appealing to Kandinsky, whose wild lines and strokes float over the canvas. In terms of color, his paintings are absolutely "malerisch," at least the early ones. Only later did he become a very dry and boring linearist.

You must find out in the same way those features in Ažbè's total work, which could be considered as catalysts of painting in Hofmann's total work. But those features have nothing in common with a Bracque or Picasso.

You and Miss Weiss must unconditionally go to the paintings of Ažbè as primary sources of the first order and only then consult his statements as the primary sources of the second order--and not vice versa, which is a mistake made by Miss Weiss. You and every one like you must use the analytical method, and not the synthetic or deductive method, in order to avoid a vicious circle. Only "Selbstessen macht fett."

I would not be going in such an extensive and simultaneously intensive way into this matter, if it were not for our Ažbè. Both of you must be credited with a high rating in that you have gone into this problem. And a problem it is. So, concludingly, I must add this:

Whatever you are going to investigate in the future in the field of European and American Art--and particularly in
the realm of the International Art Languages and Dialects—always remember that the first thing to do is to find out the problem, not to write or rewrite the stories. According to the French-Canadian philosopher Etienne Gilson, "the problems are the very stuff Philosophy is made of." The same applies to the problems in the Visual Arts. Every artist, when starting a new work, is faced with a problem he or she has to get rid of, if the work is to work. Once the problem is solved, the end result is here: the Art Work.2

In your future studies, it seems to me you will have to get acquainted with some of the theoretical giants of Art History, Art Criticism and—I would guess—Art Philosophy, too.

Sincerely,

(signed) R. Ložar

Rajko Ložar to Peter Morrin, June 24, 1979.

Dear Mr. Morrin:

Thank you kindly for your letter of June 19. I am glad to read that my letters were of help to you. It is always very gratifying to know that one has helped somebody, in order that somebody sometime in the future will surpass the writer. This is the way we used to do it in Europe.

If you are seriously considering continuing your interest in modern Slovene art, let me know. In that case I would send you all the Exhibit Catalogues I received from Ljubljana years ago, to keep. In case I should ever have a chance to come to Connecticut, we can discuss this and other matters in detail. For me it is a traumatic experience, to have so many books, and no one can use them.

I am enclosing the reprint on Bulgarian Art. The article was published in the New Catholic Encyclopedia 1965, vol. II. As soon as I find the article on Yugoslavian Art, I shall send it to you.

Also enclosed is a short or abbreviated list of my larger writings on Slovene Art. The reports and reviews,
It seems to me that I should tell you a few words about the pre-history of my studies. I started with a major in Art History at Ljubljana University in 1922. But in the summer semester of 1924 Professor Izidor Cankar told me—"Sorry, there won't be any jobs available for you Art Historians. You better switch to Archaeology because the National Museum is going to need a Curator of Archaeology." So, with a broken heart I left in April 1925 for Vienna and in 1927 I got my Ph.D. there in Classical Archaeology and Art History Philosophy. My professors were: Emil Reisch, Emanuel Löwy, Rudolf Egger, Arnold Schober in Archaeology, and in Art History Julius von Schlosser and Karl Maria Swoboda, a student of the late Prof. Max Dvořák. My Ljubljana teacher in Art History, Prof. Izidor Cankar, too, was studying with Prof. Dvořák. In the Philosophicum I had to compare my ignorance with such calibers as Prof. Heinrich Gomperz in the realm of the Pre-Socratic Philosophers, which is still for me one of the most beautiful periods in the History and Evolution of Philosophical Thought, and with Prof. Robert Reininger in the Philosophy of Plato, Aristotle and their Schools. Without credit I attended almost constantly the lectures of Josef Strzygowsky and his assistant, Heinrich Glueck, on Near Eastern, Byzantine and also Slavic Art.

I am probably one of the rare people who actually attended the lectures of Prof. Sigmund Freud, who in those times made waves in the international world with his new ideas in Psychology. Always interested not so much in Empirical Psychology as in cognitive and strictly philosophical Psychology, I have, since my arrival in this country, become fully acquainted with the Analytical Psychology of the Swiss scholar Karl Jung and am convinced that for an Art Critic, Jung's school and teachings on the subconscious—das Unbewusste—in general and in the creative process in particular is by far more a must than to follow Freud.

In November 1928 I was appointed Assistant Curator of Archaeology at the National Museum in Ljubljana and became three years later—after passing a week-long exam, required by the Civil Service in all pertinent fields—a full Curator. My colleague Stanko Vurnik became Curator in the Museum of Ethnography and did a marvelous job in reforming the evaluation and interpretation of Folk Art.
The pay for the curator was very low and it was hard to make ends meet. So, I continued my interest in Modern Art and related fields and earned through my writings additional money, which was very helpful. Where I was the sole man for the entire Department of Archaeology and the Library in 1928-1940, there are today five full-time persons working in that Department of the Narodni muzej.

In 1940 I resigned from the position at the NM and took over the "Museum of Ethnography" in the same city. There was just simply too much work for a single person at the NM.

A word on Haas von Marées. It is very possible that "das Kugelprinzip" played some role in his artistic philosophy, but I cannot say anything of consequence about this from here. If however you want to have or acquire an overall synthetic concept of nineteenth century European painting, and a good one, then I suggest you see the books by Karl Scheffler: "Die Europäische Malerei des 19. Jhddts." 2 vols (Bruno Cassirer Verlag, Berlin). Scheffler was the editor of the noted art magazine Kunst und Künstler. I was supposed to take over the correspondence on the Yugoslav Art scene, but never did because Hitler's regime suppressed the magazine. Another book by Scheffler, Die Meister des Schönen Handwerks, will give you a new vista to follow while dealing with European Painting.

As for statements by the artists, which are most important guides to the interpretation of their art, consult: H. Uhde-Bernays, Künstler-Briefe aus 5 Jahrhunderten. The Library in the Metropolitan Museum of Art surely has these works.

Sincerely,

(signed) R. Ložar
Notes

1 To get an accurate idea of the importance of the sketches and drawings at the times of the Brothers Šubic, one needs to go through the catalog of the historic exhibit of their work, organized by the National Gallery of Art in Ljubljana in 1937. We made a point of displaying, along with the church panels and frescoes, also the most relevant drawings, and in the catalog I have listed under every title of the finished work the sketches and drawings referring to that particular work. Many of these drawings, which were done mostly with pencil, are masterpieces of Slovene graphic arts. While it was Rome and the Italian art of the Renaissance (just as it was with Janez Wolf) which was the real ideal of Janez Šubic's artistic endeavors, this changed with his younger brother Jurij, who went to Paris, the Mecca of artists all over the world. And it is interesting to see the decline in the importance and number of drawings left behind by Jurij. Catalog: Janez in Jurij Šubic. (Ljubljana: Narodna galerija, 1937). This exhibit was located due to the large number of materials, in two places: the large oil paintings, mostly done for churches in Slovenia, were displayed in the great hall of the Narodna galerija, with the drawings shown in special display cases. The works of more intimate size and secular subjects were displayed in the Jakopičev paviljon, where our artists used to have their regular art exhibits.


3 A 95% complete bibliography of my writings is to appear in the near future in the bulletin Druga Vrsta (The Second Line), published and edited by Mr. Andrej Rot, Buenos Aires, Argentina. His address is: Andrej Rot, El Casezuelo (Ex Louset), 4168, 1826 Remedios de Escalada. Peia Buenos Aires, Argentina.