

THE EFFECT OF WARTIME SUFFERING ON THE CHOICE AND TRANSFORMATION OF MOTIFS IN THE WORK OF SAFET ZEC

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ABSTRACT

Safet Zec is one of the most prominent Bosnian painters and graphic artists. For decades he has been creating works with a certain number of motifs and returning to them on several occasions during his active years. Above all, in his works he depicts landscapes, architectural motifs (the house, the homestead, room, window, door...), still life (bread, a cloth, table, flower pot...), and human figures. While his early work dates back to a peaceful time in his life in former Yugoslavia, marked by an atmosphere of happiness, fulfillment, and freedom, his later works, which date from the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina and its end, depict the tragedy and collective suffering of a people. This paper aims to present the importance of the works of Safet Zec and to view his opus from the aspect of his choice of motifs, their transformation, and the message the artist conveys depending on the social circumstances. We hope that this paper will introduce the work of this artist to the wider and expert public, and provide a contribution to a broader view of his work, encouraging researchers to further study.

Keywords: Safet Zec, Yugoslavia, The War in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Painter, Graphic Artist.

SAFET ZEC'İN YAPITLARINDA MOTİF SEÇİMİ VE DÖNÜŐMÜNDE SAVAŐ ACILARININ ETKİSİ

ÖZ

Safet Zec, Bosna-Hersek ressam ve grafik en önde gelen sanatçılarından biridir. Onlarca yıldır muayyen sayıda motifle eserler yaratmakta ve meslek yaşamı

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boyunca bu motiflere birkaç defa geri dönmektedir. Eserlerinde herşeyden önce peyzaj, mimari motifler (ev, bahçe, oda, pencere, kapı ...), ölü doğa (ekmek, örtü, masa, saksı...) ve insan figürlerini tasvir etmektedir. Eski Yugoslavya'da barış ortamında meydana gelen eserleri mutluluk, tatmin ve özgürlük atmosferiyle öne çıkarken, daha sonraki, Bosna-Hersek'te savaşın devam ettiği zamandan ve savaşın bitişi sonrasındaki, eserleri bir milletin toplu ıstırabını ve trajedisini resmetmektedir. Bu çalışmanın amacı, Safet Zec'in yapıtlarının önemine işaret etmek ve onun yaratıcılığına motiflerin seçimi, bunların transformasyonu ve sanatçının toplumsal şartlara bağlı olarak verdiği mesaj açısından bakmaktır. Bu çalışmanın, sanatçının yapıtlarını profesyonel ve genel kamuoyuna yaklaştırmasını, eserlerine daha geniş bir bakış açısı kazandırmasını ve araştırmacıları yeni araştırmalara teşvik etmesini umuyoruz.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Safet Zec, Yugoslavya, Bosna-Hersek Savaşı, Ressam, Grafik Sanatçısı.

Introduction

A plethora of Bosnian artists worked in the so-called *Yugoslav art space*, which began with the end of World War II and lasted until the dissolution of the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia in 1991,¹ among whom special prominence was held by Dževad Hozo, Halil Tikveša, Emir Dragulj, and Mersad Berber. In addition, due to his choice of motifs and topics,² his creative method, and the universal human messages he conveyed

¹ Denegri Ješa, *Posleratni modernizam neoavangarde/postmodernizam, Ogledi o jugoslovenskom umetničkom prostoru 1950-1990*, Službeni glasnik, Beograd 2016. The concept of the *Yugoslav art space* was first introduced into literary criticism by Denegri who included it in the name of his exhibition *at the Museum of Contemporary Art* in Belgrade in 2002, as well as later in the titles of the publications *Ideologija postavke Muzeja savremene umetnosti - Jugoslovenski umetnički prostor* (The ideology of the exhibition of the Museum of Contemporary Art - the Yugoslav art space) (Denegri Ješa, *Poznato i novo o povijesti Novih tendencija*, Hrvatska pošta, Zagreb 2011) and *Modernizam/ avangarda. Ogledi o međuratnom modernizmu i istorijskim avangardama u jugoslovenskom umetničkom prostoru* Modernism/the avant-garde. Studies on modernism and the history, Denegri Ješa, "Specifični fenomeni jugoslovenskog umetničkog prostora: 'Socijalistički modernizam' od umerenih do radikalnih pozicija", (ed.) Mirko Miletić, *Komunikacije, mediji, kultura*, Megatrend univerzitet, Beograd, 2012, p. 297-316.

² A motif in the fine arts represents a feature of a painter's or a sculptor's works based on the presented content (landscape, pastoral, an intimist motif...), that is, a feature of a form with a decorative purpose (a decorative, ornamental motif) (*Enciklopedija likovnih umjetnosti 3*, (ed.) Mohorovičić Andrija, Jugoslovenski leksikografski zavod, Zagreb 1962, p. 500. The concept of a topic in the fine arts denotes the "main subject (idea, content) of the work of art in a figurative sense", *Enciklopedija likovnih umjetnosti 4*, (ed.) Mohorovičić Andrija,

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through them, a special place belongs to the painter and graphic artist Safet Zec. He is one of the rare artists who was, due to circumstances, a living witness of two wars, and who found himself a refugee, forced to leave his home. This paper will provide an overview of his creative work from the aspect of his choice of motifs, the influences that led to their transformation in his works, as well as the meaning and messages they conveyed, depending on when they were created. This study aims to help introduce the life and the opus of this artist, as well as to better understand them.

1. Biography

Safet Zec was born during World War II, in 1943, in the small town of Rogatica in Bosnia and Herzegovina. A year after his birth his family moved to Sarajevo³ where he spent a poverty-stricken, yet happy childhood. In 1958 he enrolled in the High School of Applied Arts. He enrolled in the Academy of Fine Arts in Belgrade in 1964, and after several crisis-ridden years during which he even contemplated giving up on his studies,⁴ he

Jugoslovenski leksikografski zavod, Zagreb 1962, p. 408. Terminologically, a motif differs from a topic in that the concept of a topic is used in the case of a “composition with mythological, legendary, historical, sacral, allegorical, and similar content”. *Enciklopedija likovnih umjetnosti 3*, (ed.) Mohorovičić Andrija, Jugoslovenski leksikografski zavod, Zagreb 1962, p. 500.

³ The population of the Balkans has throughout history undergone numerous instances of suffering, and Safet Zec is a living witness of some of them. It was already pointed out that he was born in 1943, during World War II. During this war, which brought many casualties, to a great extent, it was the Bosniaks of Srebrenica, Vlasenica, Rogatica, Višegrad, Čajnič, Goražde, and Foča that suffered. The family of Safet Zec, desperate to survive the turmoil, left Rogatica in 1944 when he was only one year old, and ran, via Višegrad, Goražde, and Foča, to settle in Sarajevo (Stojić Mile, *Ruža u oluji*, VBZ, Zagreb 2010). So he, from his earliest childhood on, listened to stories about the strife of his countrymen which left a permanent mark on his memory and had a significant impact on shaping his personality and later his creative work, primarily his choice of topics and motifs. In an interview given to Bogavac he stated: “... each and every one of us draws from what is most present within himself... and so my entire world belongs to one evocative line, a memory. Maybe it is not related to a specific document, but our evocations, our need to invoke something that has passed, which is a component part of our lives, is a human need. A single novel written by any author is in its essence a return to some memory. Of course, it is more or less dramatized, modernized”, Bogavac Branka, *Safet Zec, Uvijek se slika ono što se najbolje poznaje, Slikarstvo kao neracionalna sreća, Zbirka pariskih razgovora sa slikarima*, Pešić i Sinovi, Beograd 2004, p. 237.

⁴ Safet Zec’s first application to the Academy of Fine Arts was rejected, and what followed was a period of crisis and of adapting to the Academy, its required level of work and its character, the atmosphere of the current artistic events, and the artistic mode in and around Belgrade. Speaking of this, Giuffrè points out: “The new ambiance for the undecided young man, in his way a stranger, did not present him with a triumphant reception. Safet had a pretty

graduated in 1969 in the class of professor Nedeljko Gvozdenović. Following his graduation, he traveled to Paris⁵ where he stayed for several months. He returned to the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia to complete his obligatory military service in Đakovo.⁶ In 1970 he enrolled in a postgraduate program, also at the Academy of Fine Arts in Belgrade, in the class of professor Ljubica Sokić, which he completed in 1972.⁷ In April 1973 he was

high opinion of himself. He was aware of the progress he had diligently been striving for during the previous five years of his education; he knew that he had drawn miles of paper, that his drawings had already gained notice for his skill which resembled that of an experienced master, that he with ease learned a lot more than simple etching. Through years of hard work he had painstakingly prepared the foundations for a great future, that is, how he liked to think, for a future of someone great; -he recollects with a smile- he aimed pretty high; at Velasquez, Rembrandt, and even, he added, at the glowing attempts of young Michelangelo. However, he was denied admission to the Academy. And then the following year, when he was accepted, up until he graduated in 1969, the difference between his talent, his convictions and expectations, and the academic environment which in its intention was open to modernity became all the more obvious, since the efforts to make every transition to the work was one-sided, limiting and generally closed off. Zec couldn't, nor did he know how to sell off the legacy which he had painstakingly acquired for nothing; in whose necessity, and in whose fruit he already believed too passionately. The dominant orientation at the Academy ranged mainly along the path of the avant-garde which, having exhausted all the dynamic motivations on the creative plan, left behind heritage patterns and styles used to lure in young talent. ... He did not miss out on the rhythm of activity, but on its charge. Safet still worked tirelessly, read just as much, even more than before, and studied carefully pictures from the history of art. ... When it came to his work, the reaction to the arrogant environment of the Academy was twofold; on the one hand, 'touching up' pictures based on a different ruling taste, denied the modernist desires he felt excluded from; and on the other in the loneliness of the studio and with a great devotion he abandoned himself to drawing which he considered his true calling, private and irresistible". Giuffré Guido, *Safet Zec*, Art studio "Azinović" - "Šahinpašić", Zagreb - Sarajevo 1999, p. 69-70.

⁴ As a second-year student in college (in 1966) he took a study trip to Italy and was fascinated by the country Zec was so impressed with Italy, Venice in particular, that he wrote his art history thesis on St. Marco's Square in Venice. As Giuffré points out "He will one day want to come back and live in that city, not dreaming about the circumstances that will lead him to fulfill this dream". Giuffré, *ibid.*, p. 295.

⁵ While in Paris, Zec painted extensively and frequented museums. He was particularly thrilled by the self-taught French impressionist painter Henri Rousseau known as Le Douanier (as he was a toll and tax collector), and the gardens of Versailles.

⁶ Đakovo is a small town in the east of the Republic of Croatia. In addition to the fine arts, Zec's other passion dating from his student days was the classic guitar, and so during his military service, along with painting, he also spent time playing in the military quartet. Giuffré, *ibid.*,

⁷ Both of these professors had a considerable impact on Safet and his creative work from the aspect of motif selection. Namely, Nedeljko Gvozdenović and Ljubica Sokić belonged to the intimism/civic/bourgeois style of painting which was characterized by the depiction of landscapes, still life, portraits, and nudes. If we were to take a careful look at Zec's opus, we

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given a studio apartment in Novi Beograd and proceeded to marry Ivanka Lekaj.⁸ In 1975 he bought a house in Počitelj (Bosnia and Herzegovina) and began a seventeen-year-long endeavor to rebuild Počitelj⁹ and organize an art colony. The City of Sarajevo awarded him an art studio in 1987, to which he then moved. Due to the ensuing war, Safet Zec, after several short stays in Belgrade, Vienna, and Ljubljana, went to Udine (Italy) where he lived until 1998, after which he moved to Venice. He lives and works by dividing his time among Sarajevo, Počitelj, Venice, and Paris.

Safet Zec is the recipient of several dozen awards and commendations, of which the following should be singled out: the teachers' award handed out by the Academy of Fine Arts in Belgrade (1969), the award

would be able to note that in his works he focuses on landscapes, architectural motifs (the Bosnian *mahala*, house, the *avlija*, picket fence, wall, El Greco's house, the houses from Počitelj, the stone houses along the seacoast, Venetian houses), still life, and human figures, at the same time, giving them his mark.

⁸ Zec met his colleague, the painter Ivanka Lekaj in 1970 while attending his postgraduate studies. She played an important role in determining the course of his career and his development as an artist. Specifically, as a result of his friendship with her emerged a great many significant works, his participation in numerous exhibitions, as well as numerous prestigious awards and commendations for his work. Ivanka passed away in 2019. About her impact on and importance for Safet Zec we find out more from Giuffré: "Several years his junior, she attended art classes at the Academy, graduating when Safet, after he had finished his obligatory military service, was concluding his specialization. Her art compared to his was less marked by introversion; what is more, it was open, welcoming and light. Her sensibility and culture, the veiled, and yet unconventional vivaciousness of her temperament—just impetuous enough so as not to be confrontational with Safet's reserved nature—made up for her natural shyness. Particularly during those difficult years of disappointment, her limitless support, her invincible confidence in his giftedness, were a decisive factor in Safet reclaiming his self-confidence", according to Giuffré, *ibid.*, p. 71. (The translation is mine).

⁹ Počitelj is a medieval fortress located along the left bank of the Neretva river in the municipality of Čapljina. Its first mention dates back to historical documents from 1444, and its intense development began in the second half of the 16th century, following the arrival of the Ottomans, when it became a location of the fruitful combination of the oriental and Mediterranean building tradition. The well-known Turkish travel writer Evliya Čelebija in his work *Seyâhatnâme* in 1664 wrote about his stay in Počitelj, where he describes it as a small, low-lying town on the east bank of the Neretva river covered in slates, barns, a mosque, an imaret, tower, madrasa, hammam, and *han*. Počitelj is located in Herzegovina, on the slopes of the Dinar mountains, and is characteristics of its karst terrain, Mediterranean climate (dry and sultry summers, winters with no snow), so the houses themselves are adapted to the available material and weather conditions, and differ from the typical Bosnian house. The armed forces of the Bosnian Croats (HVO - Croatian Defence Council) destroyed Počitelj in the summer of 1993, Giuffré, *ibid.* This historical town, which had over a long period been forgotten and left to the effects of natural decay, only thanks to considerable effort, primarily on the part of Safet Zec, was declared a national monument of Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2003.

of the Association of Fine Artists for painting (1972), the award of the V Triennial of contemporary Yugoslav drawing (1975), the award of the Biennale of the Yugoslav art in New York (1978), the award of the XII Biennale artistique des pays méditerranéens (1978), the award of the XVI Biennale of graphic art in Ljubljana (1985), the major Gran-prix for drawing “Alpe Adria” (1996), and the special award of the international Triennial of graphic art in Japan (1998).¹⁰ He has exhibited in the former Yugoslavia (Ljubljana, Sarajevo, Belgrade, Novi Sad, Priština, Skoplje, Dubrovnik, Tuzla, Čača, Somboru, Zrenjanin, Požarevac...), but also outside of its borders, all over the world (Lisbon, London, New York, Paris, Schladming, Graz, Villach, Ankara, Kanagawa, Buenos Aires, Bologna, Alexandria, Hamburg...).¹¹

2. Safet Zec and the War in Bosnia and Herzegovina

The dissolution of Yugoslavia¹² began at the beginning of the 1990's and was crowned by a bloody war in Bosnia and Herzegovina which lasted from 1992 to 1995. Safet Zec and his family were in Sarajevo at the beginning of the war, which for his, and numerous other families, meant the end of a comfortable, carefree life, and the beginning of a journey into an uncertain future.¹³ At the end of March 1992, he sent his children to Canada (Montreal),

¹⁰ Giuffré, *ibid.*, p. 319.

¹¹ Giuffré, *ibid.*, p. 313-318.

¹² In 1918, following World War I, the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes were formed. Its name was changed to the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in 1929 (so-called first Yugoslavia). During World War II it was occupied by the Axis alliance. After the liberation, for a short period, it bore the name of Democratic Federative Yugoslavia, which was soon (in November of the same year) changed to the Federative People's Republic of Yugoslavia (so-called second Yugoslavia). It was a federation of six republics, of which one had two provinces. In 1963, with a new constitution, the name of the country was changed to the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia. This country would dissolve at the beginning of the 1990s, reaching its peak at the beginning of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1992. Serbia and Montenegro, two of the six republics, continued the idea of Yugoslavia, and so the Republic of Yugoslavia was declared in 1992 (so-called third Yugoslavia). It lasted until 2006.

¹³ In an interview he says of himself: “For us, as for so many people, it was a terrible, unnecessary break. We had just finished a beautiful house in Sarajevo, where my family and I lived after returning from Belgrade. We were preparing for a nice, comfortable, life, but we were forced to leave it all. Our fate is one of the schematized fates of thousands and thousands of people. We came to Italy, but of the work that I had created up till then, I had nothing—it had all been left behind in Sarajevo. The artists in former Yugoslavia were not worried about having an international career. Simply, we were fine in the Yugoslav ambient. Even though I was famous in Yugoslavia, no one knew about me in Italy. Fate, life led me to a completely new beginning, at an advanced age, and with two children.” Sabljaković Una, “Safet Zec, Imam

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while he and his wife remained in Sarajevo until 1993. In an interview he gave, he said:

“That period, from the spring of 1993, when I left Sarajevo which was under siege at the time, until the spring of 1994, when I settled down in Dunaj, I spent like a pendulum out of control—I ‘swayed left and right’ in overnight buses and passenger trains from Zagreb to Berlin and from Crikvenica to Bern, trying to find shelter from the war and violent nationalism which was threatening to destroy me and my family. That year I was a guest speaker at various discussion panels, ex-Yugoslav, Croatian, and Muslim clubs and pubs, I visited refugee camps and apartments, and all the while people were asking me to explain something that I did not understand—why and how this aggression had befallen Bosnia.”¹⁴

After settling down in Udine (Italy), he immediately began work in the graphic art center *Albi cocco Santini*. At this time he created numerous works with motifs that he had used previously - architectural motifs (the Bosnian house, *mahalas*, windows), still life (bread, kitchen cloths, tables), human figures. However, now he processed them in a completely different way, using them as a means to reflect the spiritual state he was in - grieving for his homeland and deeply suffering because of the struggle and exodus of thousands of innocent people.

3. The Transformation of the Motifs

There are only a few artists who dedicated their attention to the motif of the house and its surroundings to the extent that Safet Zec did. Therefore, we could say that they, based on their frequency and duration, are the most prevalent motifs in his work.¹⁵ Most often, Safet Zec painted the Bosnian house (an oriental house of the continental type which, with the arrival of the Ottomans, reached and was immediately accepted in Bosnia), open, often spread out toward nature and the sky, with open windows behind which we can glimpse the tips of trees, the close line of the horizon, and the light of a

genetsku zavisnost od Bosne”, *Deutsche Welle*, December 3, 2016, <https://www.dw.com/bs/21.04.2020>).

¹⁴ Stojić Mile, *Ruža u oluji*, VBZ, Zagreb 2010.

¹⁵ Lavrinović Ivan, *Mali rječnik ili uvod u stvaralštvo, Izložba Safeta Zeca [exhibition catalog]*, Collegiumu Artisticumu, Sarajevo 2001.

lofty sky.¹⁶ The houses are dominated by the color green which for Safet Zec is an “atmosphere of eternal summer, which is irreplaceable...”.¹⁷ However, in his works with a house motif, created between 1992 and 1996, the facades of the houses are damaged, derelict, irregular, and could be said to represent the factual state of affairs following the devastation of war throughout the country. The mortar on the facades is like a crust, which has been “scratched at”, grey, and the overall atmosphere gives an impression of abandonment and decay (Example 1).



Example 1. The motif of the Bosnian house in the work of Safet Zec before¹⁸ and after the war.¹⁹

The arrival of the Ottomans to the Balkans meant a more intense construction of numerous settlements in all parts of the Balkans, and the beginning of urbanization. The *čaršija* was the business zone and a place to advertise public jobs and functions, while the *mahalas* (the residential areas) were slightly isolated, often located on a slope, and represent more peaceful residential zones and the intimacy of family life.²⁰ In his work preceding the

¹⁶ The extent of the importance that Zec’s paintings with the Bosnian house motif had for displaced Bosnian refugees is best captured in the words of Stojić “those who had forcefully been evicted from their homes were able to find, just for a moment, peace for their overtrodden and annulled being in that dream-like and remembered Bosnian house”, Stojić Mile, *Ruža u oluji*, VBZ, Zagreb, 2010, p. 38.

¹⁷ Bogavac Branka, *Safet Zec, Uvijek se slika ono što se najbolje poznaje, Slikarstvo kao neracionalna sreća, Zbirka pariskih razgovora sa slikarima*, Pešić i Sinovi, Beograd 2004, p. 238.

¹⁸ Giuffré, *op.cit.*, p. 75.

¹⁹ Retrieved from Zec Safet, <http://www.safetzec.com/index.php?id=24>, (12.02.2022).

²⁰ Zukić Kemal, *Islamska arhitektura, slikarstvo i primenjene umjetnosti, knjiga II*, Bošnjački institut, Sarajevo 2001.

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war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Safet Zec depicted the vivid arrangement of the houses on the slopes with their pronounced inclusion into a landscape that abounds in luscious green vegetation. However, these same, sometimes full of life, Bosnian *mahalas* in his post-war work became bleak. The atmosphere conveys the devastation of war, while the covered *mezars* or graves, on the top of the hill, symbolize and remind us of the human losses during the war (Example 2).



Example 2. The motif of the Bosnian mahala in the work of Safet Zec before²¹ and after the war.²²

Zec's fascination with the window dates back to his early youth, and he began to include this motif in the 1970's.²³ The art critic Đorđe Kadijević had the following to say about his pre-war works with the window motif in an interview given to the magazine NIN on May 20, 1973: "It is a window in the surroundings of a natural, green silence, in a close, never-ending moment of unspoken intimacy with sights already seen, a certain kind of evening light, looking out onto rich foliage, a yard in damp shadow, empty rooms which someone had been in and had left".²⁴ However, the post-war windows carry particular weight and a wide array of heavy and painful emotions. Their overall coloristic atmosphere, unlike that of the windows before the war, is located in a soft dark brown *gama*, ranging from red to black. Here we do not

²¹ From Giuffrè, *op. cit.*, p. 161.

²² Retrieved from Safet Zec, 1943/Allegories of Fate, <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/563018693799957/>, (12.02.2022).

²³ Bonafoux Pascal, "Predgovor", *Djela 1958-2001 [exhibition catalog]*, Collegium Artisticum, Sarajevo 2001.

²⁴ Kadijević, Đorđe, "Dug i zahvalnost", *Nin*, May 20 1973, p. 17.

see the light and coloristic accents which revived earlier compositions. It is as if the artist wants to use them to depict pain, suffering and the heavy burden carried by post-war windows (Example 3).



Example 3. The motif of the window of the Bosnian house in the works of Safet Zec before²⁵ and after the war.²⁶

The room, as an intimate space of the interior of the house which represents a place of deep spiritual peace and composure, is a frequent motif in the early works of Zec. In the pre-war period, he usually painted the room of his mother, which is green in his works. In an interview about his mother's room he said that it was a "*symbol of all rooms... it is green because it was created in the full swing of summer and turned into an overwhelming gama of green which surrounded us, and which was dictated by what was happening outside.*"²⁷ This motif reappears in Zec's later creative phases, but it is no longer green, and instead, the room is more of a dismal ambiance for his still-life motifs. After the war broke out in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the

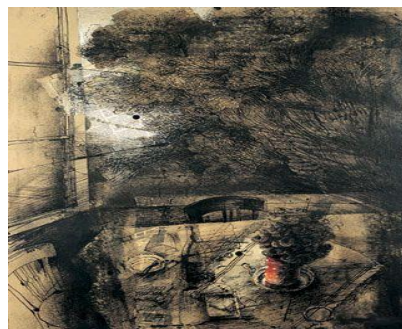
²⁵ Retrieved from Doors and Windows, Venice - Safet Zec/Mark Murray Fine Art, <https://pin.it/4tXqcHf>, (February 12, 2022).

²⁶ Retrieved from Mehicic Salem, <https://pin.it/6gwx5PU>, (12.02.2022).

²⁷ Bogavac Branka, *Safet Zec, Uvijek se slika ono što se najbolje poznaje, Slikarstvo kao neracionalna sreća, Zbirka pariskih razgovora sa slikarima*, Pešić i Sinovi, Beograd 2004, p. 238.

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rooms in Zec's works are "quite different",²⁸ with no windows, with deep, opaque shadows, quite threatening (Example 4).



Example 4. The motif of the Bosnian room in the work of Safet Zec before²⁹ and after the war.³⁰

The motif of bread in the work of Safet Zec has a symbolic meaning. In his pre-war work, the bread is white, on a clean cloth, usually sliced with a knife. In his post-war work, it is a "warning" and points to the "necessity of a rude awakening."³¹ In one of his interviews, Safet Zec, when speaking of the works from his opus *Hljeb dobročinstva* or the Bread of Human Kindness (Example 5.), states the following: "In the picture that is on the cover of an exhibition catalog from Rome, there is an entire bouquet of hands. In the top left corner, there are photographs of bread being handed out during the war in Sarajevo, of that terrible moment when hundreds of hands were stretched out desperately to reach the bread being handed out from a truck. These are distressing images, and I turned all that into a symbol of bread as salvation..."³²

²⁸ Lavrinović Ivan, *Mali rječnik ili uvod u stvaralštvo, Izložba Safeta Zeca [exhibition catalog]*, Collegiumu Artisticumu, Sarajevo 2001.

²⁹ Retrieved from Zec Safet, <http://www.safetzec.com/index.php?id=7&gal=242&quale=6>, (12.02.2022).

³⁰ Retrieved from Zec Safet, <http://www.safetzec.com/index.php?id=7&gal=4&quale=4>, (12.02.2022).

³¹ Bonafoux Pascal, "Predgovor", *Djela 1958-2001 [exhibition catalog]*, Collegium Artisticum, Sarajevo 2001, p. 14.

³² Sabljaković Una, "Safet Zec, Imam genetsku zavisnost od Bosne", *Deutsche Welle*, December 3, 2016, <https://www.dw.com/bs>, (21. 04. 2020). Bonafoux describes an image from Zec's studio. In the left-hand corner of this easel, there is a pasted photograph of arms stretched out towards bread that is being offered. "Seen a thousand times. An obscene banality. Refugees. Food being distributed by an NGO.", Bonafoux Pascal, "Predgovor", *Djela 1958-2001*



Example 5. The motif of bread in the work of Safet Zec before³³ and after the war.³⁴

In the works of Zec, mysterious kitchen cloths and wrinkled covers with deep dark shadows, of light but a usually not completely white color, sometimes with a pattern woven into them, are mostly just a part of the still life on the table or draped on the back of a chair. In the early work of Zec, they are draped in almost ballet-like movements, allowing us to find the traces of the person who has left them there. Contrary to that, the clothes in Zec's post-war work are a witness of Zec's loneliness, longing, and anxiety (Example 6). In his work, they are sometimes even bloody and wrapped around a lifeless body, and are witnesses to difficult human fates. Within them, the aesthetic dramatically touches upon the existential, the artistic upon the ethical.

[*exhibition catalog*], Collegium Artisticum, Sarajevo 2001, p. 14. He goes on to ask: "Why has Zec decided to tape it right there, so that it is obvious at first glance, a photograph which reports on the day and hour when the humanitarian aid was distributed on the border crossing, in the town square where no provisions are being received due to the warfare, in the surroundings or the refugee camp" Bonafoux, *ibid.*, p. 14. It is there, he says, to "stop one's gaze on the photograph, on that same image we have seen while leafing through the paper... as an immediate warrant issued to one's gaze, yours, my gaze, an invitation for us to look" (Bonafoux, *ibid.*).

³³ Retrieved from Mis Adro, <https://pin.it/66Q7qGs>, (12.02.2022).

³⁴ Retrieved from Evelyne Devillers, <https://pin.it/2GvjAhK>, (12.02.2022).

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Example 6. The motif of the cloth in the work of Safet Zec before³⁵ and after the war.³⁶

The embrace is a frequent motif in the work of Safet Zec. In his pre-war works, the embrace is passionate. However, after the war, it is predominantly dramatic. It was inspired by a particular love story tied to one of the tragic events of the war. Namely, on May 18, 1993, Admira Ismić (a Bosniak woman) and Boško Brkić (a Bosnian Serb) tried to escape from Sarajevo which was under siege at the time. They were shot by a sniper rifle and died embraced in the street. Today they are known as the “Romeo and Juliet of Sarajevo”. Zec’s cycle *Zagrljaji* or Embraces is dedicated precisely to them. In an interview given to a reporter from Free Europe, Zec had the following to say: “I am moved by that tragedy, that personal tragedy of Admira and Boško, and I wanted to, if nothing else, dedicate this exhibition to them and in a way finish it, give the story closure, and if life were to let me, go on working with other content, with other loves which still shake me to my core.”³⁷

³⁵ From Giuffré, *op.cit.*, p. 98.

³⁶ Retrieved from Giuffré, *op.cit.*, p. 105.

³⁷ Obradović Ajla, “Safet Zec, Prisustvujemo obnovi fašizma i nacizma”, *Radio slobodna Evropa*, May 7, 2019, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org>, (21.04.2020).



Example 7. The motif of the embrace in the works of Safet Zec before³⁸ and after the war.³⁹

During this war, in addition to a great many casualties, displaced, and missing individuals on all sides (among the Bosnians, Serbs, and Croats who are the constituent peoples of Bosnia and Herzegovina), and the complete dissolution of a country, an event which the *International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia* and the *International Court of Justice* characterized as genocide, permanently marked the war and left a blemish on all of mankind. That event is the massacre in Srebrenica which took place in July 1995. At that time, military, police, and paramilitary formations of the Bosnian Serb forces carried out a series of mass liquidations of several thousand Bosniak men and boys. The precise number of those murdered is as yet unknown.

Moved by this tragic event, Safet Zec created a cycle of works and named it *Srebrenica*, in which he, as he pointed out, painted the drama of those who physically survived a massacre and mass liquidation “to the limits

³⁸ Retrieved from Giuffré, *op. cit.*, p. 78.

³⁹ Retrieved from Safet Zec à Paris–Le pouvoir de la peinture–ArtsHebdoMédias, <https://pin.it/7iwftrM>, (12.02.2022).

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of unendurable pain... whose souls were destroyed and systematically extinguished”,⁴⁰ as well as of those who had lost their loved ones (Example 8). In an interview given to the daily paper Avaz, speaking about the works in this cycle, he stated: “Man, while he lives, is always trying to add something, to say something more about that tragedy, to leave a trace. It is a rather extensive group of works and it is always present in part in all of my exhibitions. Naturally, I am always looking for an opportunity to integrally present these works. The understanding that people know very little about it, that they are not very informed either historically or humanly about the dimensions of that tragedy, makes it over and over again my duty to contribute to the truth of what happened so that it may never happen again.”⁴¹ In the same interview he points out that “he will never stop speaking out about the injustice that befell innocent mothers, fathers, daughters, and sons, since it is his duty as a human and an artist.”⁴²



Example 8. The motif of the mother from Srebrenica⁴³

The motif of the human face is one of the central motifs in Zec's opus following the massacre in Srebrenica. Every picture from the cycle *Suze* or *Tears* represents “a meeting with the experience of the individuality of each

⁴⁰ Zec Safet, “Nikada neću prestatı govoritı o Srebrenici”, *Rogatica.com*, July 13, 2014, <http://www.rogatica.com/index.php/vijesti-bih>, (9.12.2016).

⁴¹ Zec, *ibid.*

⁴² Zec, *ibid.*

⁴³ Retrieved from Novi, <https://novi.ba/clanak/81004/srebrenica?page=4>, (12.02.2022).

human suffering.”⁴⁴ In the foreword to the catalog of one of Zec’s exhibitions, Abadžić Hodžić wonders: “How does one paint the face of a cosmic tragedy? How does one paint tens of thousands of lost faces?”⁴⁵ She asks these questions because Zec in this cycle painted people with no faces to artistic perfection (Example 9), which will forever remain one of the “most memorable visual reminders of the tragedy of Srebrenica.”⁴⁶ In this cycle of works, in addition to people with no faces, he also depicted “a hand heavily pressing against the forehead of a man who is seated, the hand of a woman which is trying to stifle the sound of despair and disbelief, intertwined, tired hands carrying the weary body of a wounded man...”⁴⁷



Example 9. The motif of humans with no faces.⁴⁸

During his early creative period, Safet Zec painted numerous works which included human figures. However, at one point in his life, specifically, the time when he lived and worked in Belgrade, he gave an advantage to the motif of foliage, and so, as a result, almost did not deal with the human figure at all. The massacre in Srebrenica encouraged his return to the human figure in his post-war work, especially during the cycle *Exodus* (Example 10). In this cycle, where he depicts the exodus of innocent people from their

⁴⁴ Abadžić Hodžić, *Aida, Kako naslikati lice jedne kozmičke tragedije, Lica kozmičke tragedije [exhibition catalog]*, Bosansko narodno pozorište, Zenica 2009, p. 8.

⁴⁵ Abadžić Hodžić, *ibid.*, p. 6.

⁴⁶ Abadžić Hodžić, *ibid.*.

⁴⁷ Abadžić Hodžić, *ibid.*.

⁴⁸ Retrieved from Mehicic Salem, <https://pin.it/731IT4Y>, (12.02.2022).

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homeland under difficult and dramatic circumstances, Safet Zec achieves the pinnacle of artistry in his work.



Example 10. The motif of the lifeless body in a wheelchair.⁴⁹

Conclusion

Safet Zec has actively been producing academic work since the mid-1970s and continues to do so today. He is not an artist who uses a great number of motifs in his work. They mainly include landscapes, the motif of the Bosnian house, room, window, *mahala*, still life (bread, a table, a piece of cloth...) and human figures. Throughout his entire opus, he returns to them, transforming them so that they become a means of conveying a new message. The aforementioned motifs were marked by the artist's happiness, harmony, and inner peace during peacetime in Yugoslavia. Everything is green, lively, full of life, and pure. However, from the beginning of the war when he and his countrymen went on to experience hard times, even though the choice of motifs did not change, his works took on a completely different atmosphere. They became dark, and the previously used motifs became a means of presenting human suffering, helplessness, and struggle.

⁴⁹ Retrived from Exodus, el drama de la inmigración reflejado por Safet Zec - Esto no es arte, <https://pin.it/55RSCE3>, (12. 02. 2022).

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Even though before the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina he created art that presented human figures, we can conclude that this motif dominates his creative opus during the war and after it and that within it he achieves the pinnacle of artistry.

The work of Safet Zec requires an aesthetic analysis which includes not only the observation of his work from the aspect of motifs, as was done in this paper but also of artistic elements and principles (techniques, lines, colors/coloring, shapes, and forms, dimensions, the state of surfaces) and their mutual relations. However, due to the scope of this paper, it was not possible to do so, and it remains a topic of future work. We hope to have, at least in part, brought the work of this Bosnian painter and graphic artist closer to the public and hope to have encouraged researchers to study his work further.

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