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**TWO WOMEN, ONE PORTRAIT.  
*PORTRAIT OF KSENIJA ATANASIJEVIĆ BY NADEŽDA PETROVIĆ.*<sup>1</sup>**

*Summary:*

The paper will discuss the portrait of the young Ksenija Atanasijević (1912) painted by Nadežda Petrović. The portrait is characterized by Nadežda's modernist motivation and desire to innovate Serbian painting, culture and the general emancipation of society, as well as the emancipation of women. The portrait was created in the year when Ksenija Atanasijević, a family friend, graduated, and most likely after Nadežda's return from Paris (January 1912). The portrait bears the stylistic features of Nadežda's advanced modernism, liberated during her work in Paris. It can be compared to the portrait of Ksenija Atanasijević made by Uroš Predić in 1917 – as a complete stylistic, ideological and symbolic counterpoint to Nadežda's spontaneous vision of the „free eye”. Predić constitutes Ksenija as a young intellectual, just before enrolling at the faculty. Nadežda's portrait can emphasize the most important fact – the unappreciated efforts of women in a patriarchal society, the struggle for education and the dignity of the profession, constant proving in front of society of disapproving women's intellectual, academic and artistic achievements. Nadežda Petrović since 1915, Ksenija Atanasijević almost all her life, faced rejecting of their endeavors by dominantly male society, academic or artistic environment and largely unappreciated by critics.

*Key words:*

Ksenija Atanasijević, Nadežda Petrović, Uroš Predić, portrait, fine arts, philosophy

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Nadežda Petrović, *Portrait of Ksenija Atanasijević*, 1912, Oil on card, 22,4 x 17 cm, Memorial collection of Pavle Beljanski, Novi Sad

„The family remembers”, notes Katarina Ambrozić, „that Ksenija came to visit Nadežda when she returned from Paris. It was winter time. Ksenija was sitting for Nadežda, in the snow covered courtyard, in Ratarska Street with a large black hat on, which Nadežda brought from Paris for her sister Mica” (Ambrozić 1978, 490). Nadežda returned from Paris in January of 1912. The portrait Ambrozić occasionally names as „Ksenija” (quite possibly the painting was originally named that way), is a winter portrait in a snowy courtyard of the street.<sup>2</sup> This was most probably one of the first Nadežda’s paintings after her return from Paris – where she won a battle with her liberated, expressive image which is clear to the naked eye from this little portrait. Many paintings she was executing in „one stroke” with no technical priming, she did on small cards against backgrounds of other paintings, as was after all her own, now iconic, self-portrait from 1907.

In the very same 1912, eighteen years old Ksenija Anastasijević (born in 1894) graduated from high school and decided on her further education. Exactly as Nadežda had done, she graduated from High School for Girls in Belgrade where she trained painting in the class of Djordje Krstić. Twenty one years her senior, Nadežda, who had six younger sisters and two brothers Vladimir and Rastko, might have looked at Ksenija not only as Rastko’s friend (who was 4 years younger than Ksenija), but also as her youngest sister, much adored Andja. Or, as her student. She taught Ksenija drawing at the High School for Girls.<sup>3</sup> Given that as a woman she was not eligible to enter any Academy of Fine Arts let alone her favoured one in Munich, Nadežda first gets instructed by Kiril Kutlik in Belgrade and takes private classes with Djordje Krstić. Then in 1898, helped by a modest stipend, enters Anton Ažbe’s Munich School, the diploma of which recognised and verified by the Academy (under the law not enrolling women). This is just the beginning of Nadežda’s modern schooling, experimenting, wandering, searching – all the way to attaining that painterly emancipated masterhood and self-confident agility in which the portrait of Ksenija takes shape. It is highly likely that only then Nadežda and Ksenija crossed paths.

2 Oil on card, 22,4x17 cm, with no sign. Memorial collection of Pavle Beljanski, Inv. SZPB 104.

3 Perhaps worth reminding: junior and higher education female teachers received 15–20% less pay than that of their male counterparts.

As of 1912, the older, Nadežda joins the Balkan Wars. Her junior, Ksenija Atanasijević continues education at the University in Belgrade.

Fourteen years before then, so she could at all reach her desired independence, Nadežda attempts to rid herself of traditional societal constraints. Although there exist some half official and private notes regarding Nadežda's breaking of marriage engagement, it remains difficult to this day to assess whether for Nadežda this was just an excuse to stay away from marriage and ties in Belgrade. Wishing to pursue her imagined way of freedom and education that would take her towards modernisation of art but also political activism, humanitarian aid work, partaking in the Balkan and Great Wars and early death. The only known marriage engagement she broke in 1898 as it is understood to this day, presumably irritated and hurt by the bargaining of her prospective mother-in-law regarding value of her dowery. More to the point, she was asserting she was being reduced to an object of exchange: „Dearest mother, you know yourself how unhappy I have been by my own disheartenment [...] Work brought oblivion [...] I neither seek love, husband, man, nor heart and respect, I shall live just for myself and my parents [...] Entire educated West lives that way which is the smartest, I am in accord with it [...] I really am content not to have married, for had I done it, I would just be an ordinary woman [...] like other friends of mine who merely clear their debt to nature. I will see that I clear my debts the other way [...] About my marriage not a word any more, I want to be a painter, not just a woman, there are great many women [...] Please know my highest ideal is painting [...] If you really wish me happiness, then you too will expect of me to be a painter, not a marrying maiden [...]”. (Ambrozić 1978, 48)

Nadežda, far enough from the casbah and somewhat further out in time from the burgeoning „gutter press” (in comparison with young Ksenija Atanasijević in the 20ies and 30ies of 20th Century), successful at everything, close to circles of King Petar I, particularly with regards to organising of the First Yugoslav Exhibition, coronation and celebration of 100 years of the First Serb Uprising (1904), is not managing to earn neither affirmative nor benevolent critics' reviews.

On the occasion of her first one woman show, opened during summer holidays, August 25<sup>th</sup> 1900, she was called „Miss Petrović's” she received one, for a woman artist at the start of career, really scathing review: „After her Academy<sup>4</sup> tuition, after her long exposure to both works of old and contemporary masters, the Miss has not found better and prettier examples to look up to and follow for the sake of her enchanting young age, but „impressionist works”, that sick, rotten conception of sick and rotten minds. (Odavić 1900, 988) These were not, alas, just „blustering words and petty slander”, as is somewhat trivialised by Lazar Trifunović (Trifunović 1990, 16), they are denominators, then and nowadays, of inept, brutal disposition of a local crowd and more than that, a sign of prevalent traditional

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4 Not known what the author of the text exactly meant, because Nadežda Petrović was not, as a woman, eligible a student at the Academy in Munich.

local vitriol towards the *otherness*. Undercurrent mysogony is what these „raging words” stemming from „petty slander” speak to an official societal attitude of the environment where a woman acted sooner, with more efficacy, zest, strength and creativity than any of her male counterparts.<sup>5</sup>

Negative bias towards Nadežda Petrović was twofold. The first was traditional, patriarchal treatment of own gender of which speak both „breaking of marriage engagement” and excuses made to her mother about that which she cares little, so it seems at that moment. She does not hold a grudge against this attitude of the society, at least not overtly, she has no considerable objections to indicate inclination toward early feminist stance. She could likely be much more affected by a loathful posture of art reviews which officially negate the new art Nadežda believes in. Expert critics’ reviews that follow her to the rest of her life, with rare exceptions, are neither characterised by a specialist discernment of her modernist enterprise, nor kindness. The greatest authoritative specialist recognition of her work were by Mosa Pijade and Branko Popovic. There is no notable public push back against disparaging of women’s involvement in „male pursuit” (to somehow include art too).<sup>6</sup> Having conscripted for the war to become a wartime nurse, brings to an end a series of belittlings. Brilliant, modern paintings of the „battler period” are produced. Ordained by a medal while on the front line, though unofficially, „made her equal to males”, as Katarina Ambrozic writes. Following her ordaining and *Camps/Hospital in Valjevo* (painting), only necrologues will ensue. As was in the 2006 and again today, I pose an uncomfortable question. Would Nadežda Petrović have become a national heroine had she died behind her easel and not as a wartime nurse (concisely: had she not become „equal to men”). This question has nothing to do with her masterly painting. It is mainly to do with a traditionalist social contract. How did that contract work becomes apparent from an example of Ksenija Anastasijević’s ill fortune. She was never accepted as a national heroine despite excellent accomplishments. She is pushed aside and marginalised away from academic and social life because she deemed just the opposite – that she need not be „equal to men” to be able to attain her aims as a woman.

Surrounded by the distinguished and authoritative professors at the Faculty of Philosophy, Ksenija comes across as a „wonderkid” at first (sympathies for a sparkly youngster are unsurprising), and then, during her doctoral dissertation examination, strongly competitive academically and as a person „with excess male

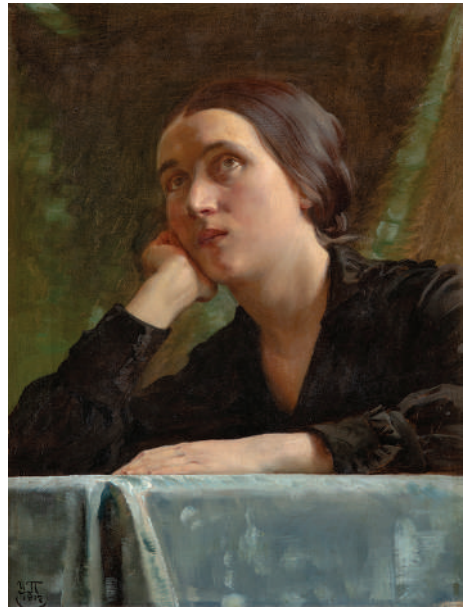
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5 This passage is an extract out of L. Merenik, *Nadežda Petrović. Project and Destiny*, Belgrade 2006.

6 Fact, that only around the end of XX Cen and the beginning of XXI Cen., more closely researched, studied and interpreted are the paintresses of the XX Cen first two decades: Natalija Cvetković, Vidosava Kovačević, Danica Jovanović, Milica Bešević, Anđelija Lazarević, Jovanka Marković Strajnić, Mara Lukić Jelesić...that probably very little is known, if at all (except in the Zrenjanin Museum holding her legacy) about Paulina Sudarski (1914–1943), best kept Dobrović’s student, a war nurse herself executed alongside deadly wounded and typhoid ridden soldiers in the battle on Sutjeska River (WWII) and who during the time German troops were „cleansing” the terrain of infectious diseases remained with the sick and wounded until her own sorry end.

hormones”. The wonder child proved worthy of permissibility. However, intellectual, particularly female competition amid predominately male circles was not – not really. And it wasn’t. Nadezda’s good fortune, conditionally put, was founded on a fact that she is off-institutional, free painteress and off party politician, therefore, freer than Ksenija Atanasijević whom academic accomplishment was never forgiven and who, as an odd ball Associate Professor, was a sore to the eye of the rigid University establishment.

Whilst studying and during the time of occupation of Belgrade, in the year 1917, a distinguished sixty years old painter Uroš Predić paints a portrait of her.<sup>7</sup> He had been meeting a group of younger artists and intellectuals, among them Ksenija who was known as a good pianist too. Jelica Lomić (later Tadić) recounts about these parties: „In her parents’ house, as for an example, a few young people would perform chamber music once every week with tea and cakes to suit. Music lover and a regular visitor was also Uroš Predić himself.” (Jovanović, Predić, 122) At these parties Ksenija was playing while Uroš was looking for models for his paintings and portraits, evidently enjoying the company of younger people during somber and perilous period of occupation. The club frequented painters Milica Bešević and Anđelija Lazarević too and Uroš chose Jelica Lomić to model for his piece *Young Woman at the Fountain* (*Devojka na studencu*). Through this kind of interacting, somehow, the portrait of Ksenija Atanasijević came to be. He imbued in her not only new style in appearance but a different aura from that of what Nadežda Petrović did. This is no longer „time of innocence” of a graduate wearing a borrowed hat posing in a snow covered courtyard. Predić delivers her image through a registry of saintliness: pensive, aloof, meditative, humble young woman in black. Her gaze strays upwards into the unknown, into wonderings: What may still happen? With the war on, with philosophy, with women, with her own self? Despite being an excellent student under the tuition of Prof. Branislav Petronijević, neither her nor Predić could expect the sensational success of her



Uroš Predić, *Portrait of Ksenija Atanasijević*, 1917, Oil on canvas, 54 x 41 cm, Art Collection of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Belgrade, photo: V. Popović

7 This painting is now kept as part of collection of SANU, belongings of Ksenija Atanasijević are scattered as she had no descendants. For the same reason her burial site is not known. After her passing in 1981 there was nobody to upkeep the burial ground where she lay, or pay for it, so it was destroyed and resold.



dissertation, or sexist, academic and parochial malice, which, in the end, will have her expelled from the University. However, at that moment in the year 1917, she becomes exalted melancholy young heroine of self-reliant „misses” responsible for their own future life path. Out of there stem two portraits of Ksenija Atanasijević, two atmospheres, two thoughts, two painterly styles. „Experimental”, ferocious, modern expressive Nadežda’s – portrait of a resolute girl, against Predić’s: tranquil, tender melancholia in the best manner of academic painting seen in our parts.<sup>8</sup> Tranquility and melancholy of the girl portrayed and that of the artist coalesced here. They are akin. What was to be going forward?

In the year 1917, Nadežda Petrović is no more, neither is her darling sister Andja who passed away in 1914. In the year 1915 both her sister Draga and brother Vladimir sadly die. Her brother Rastko leaves 3rd Grammar School for Boys at the onset of the Balkan Wars and as 20 years old, along with the Serbian Army, retreats across Šumadija, Župa, Kosovo and Prokletije and survives the passage of army and civilians through Albania in 1915. From Corfu, where he was evacuated like other soldiers and wartime painters, he leaves for Paris. Upon completing education, he returns to Belgrade in 1922 where he writes seminal art reviews under the pen name: N. J (Not me) and other literary pieces.

Petrović family disappear from the scene, Rastko grew up and never ceased defending modernism his oldest sister founded: „Being different from the whole world, of course, in art”. (R. Matić Panić 14) Ksenija ends up lacking a friendly companionship and many helping hands. Devoid of the whole enormous support the kinship could extend in the hardest moments following her doctoral dissertation defence success and acceptance of Associate Professor’s post at the University. The dissertation *Bruno’s Tenet of the Smallest (Brunovo učenje o najmanjem)*, she defended in January of 1922. Assuming of the Associate Professor’s post threw her, as Ljiljana Vuletić notes, into the „jaws of academic elites and parochial pundits”. (Vuletić 2020, 10–26) The battle raged on until October 1935 with shots relentlessly fired from all fronts (from Academia’s to parochial kibitzers’, aided by the gutter press and hearsay) – plethora of the plagiarism allegations and love affairs abound. It was a feud where a likely winner could easily be called – the misogynist, mean, vengeful academic elite in cahoots with parochial pundits, mindlessly and blindly colluding to turn Predić’s pensive heroine into Joan of Arc.

As were Nadežda Petrović’s enduring apologists Pijade and Popović able to have her vindicated during the times of historical ethical turmoil, so did Živojin M. Perić, lawyer and Professor of Civil Rights at the University in Belgrade, stand for Ksenija Atanasijević in public Court of Law and had her morally exculpated. He was warning that the expulsion of female Associate Professor disallowed a rank promotion was utterly unlawful. Dr Ksenija Atanasijević gave up her post at the University to take to translating and writing philosophical tractates and books. The

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8 Interesting for history of art is that Nadežda’s portrait is way more recognised, displayed and reproduced than that of Predić’s.

fundamental thesis she was developing was a problem of Evil (in individuals and society alike). „And with serene forbearance spoke to her own self: *Feci quod potui, faciant meliora potentes*” / I have done the best I could, let the ones who can do better take it further.”. (Vuletić 2005, 152)

More recent case history of applying due diligence to studying works of Nadežda Petrović and Ksenija Atanasijević brought vindication to both women. Nadežda’s promise: „I shall see that I clear my debt another way” and Ksenija’s: „About me, my work shall speak” despite their age difference, albeit not the only difference, bearing in mind their ideological disagreements or reasons past 1912, are the undisputed fundamentals not necessarily and exclusively of feminism (Nadežda was more of a political activist and emancipator than a declared feminist) and broader than that – of the need for such freedom of movement, expression, professional engagement relying solely on the personal responsibility and moral integrity which will enable them the undisturbed and stellar work achievements.

Undisturbed and free: to clear own debts another way and to only have their achievements speak of them. In the end, this is what they have accomplished. It was a thorny path to walk, almost deadly...that path.

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**DVE ŽENE. JEDAN PORTRET.  
PORTRET KSENIJE ATANASIJEVIĆ NADEŽDE PETROVIĆ**

*Apstrakt:*

U radu će biti reči o portretu mlade Ksenije Atanasijević (1912) koji je naslikala Nadežda Petrović. Ovaj portret odlikuju Nadeždina modernistička motivacija i želja za inoviranjem srpskog slikarstva, kulture i sveopštom emancipacijom društva, kao i emancipacijom žena. Portret je nastao u godini kada je Ksenija Atanasijević, inače porodična prijateljica, maturirala i najverovatnije po Nadeždinom povratku iz Pariza, odakle se vratila januara 1912. Portret nosi stilske odlike Nadeždinog uznapredovanog modernizma, oslobođenog tokom rada u Parizu. Ovaj portret se može porediti i sa portretom Ksenije Atanasijević koji je uradio Uroš Predić 1917 – kao potpuni stilski, idejni i simbolički kontrapunkt Nadeždinom spontanom viđenju „slobodnog oka”. Predić u ovom portretu uspostavlja Kseniju kao mladu intelektualku, neposredno pred upis na fakultet. Nadeždin portret nam može skrenuti pažnju i na ono najvažnije – nezahvalan položaj žena u patrijarhalnom društvu, borbu za školovanje, dostojanstvo profesije i stalno dokazivanje pred društvom koje je nipodaštavalo intelektualna, akademska i umetnička dostignuća žena. Odbacivanje dostignuća kako Nadežde, tako i Ksenije više nego rečito govori o tome.

*Ključne reči:*

Ksenija Atanasijević, Nadežda Petrović, Uroš Predić, portret, umetnost, filozofija

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