

Furnishing the Temple of Croatian History and Science: Art Nouveau Interiors of the Croatian National and University Library and the State Archives Building

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Ce texte détaille le programme iconographique du bâtiment Art nouveau le plus important du pays : la Bibliothèque universitaire et les Archives nationales de Croatie. Il montre notamment comment la sélection des artistes, des artisans et des entreprises qui y ont travaillé est liée à la particularité de la situation politique croate au sein du royaume austro-hongrois au début du XX^e siècle.

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INTRODUCTION

etween 1911 and 1913, after decades of preparation, a home for the Croatian National and University Library and State Archives was built in the centre of Croatia's capital, Zagreb. It was designed by the local architect Rudolf Lubynski. Today, it is considered the most important example of Croatian Art Nouveau architecture.

This text deals with the interiors of the building, which have remained almost completely preserved and were recently part-restored. It discusses how the iconographic programme of its interior design reflected the role of the building and how the selection of artists, craftsmen and companies furnishing it was grounded in the specific political position of Croatia in the early twentieth century within the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy.

THE BUILDING OF THE CROATIAN NATIONAL AND UNIVERSITY LIBRARY AND STATE ARCHIVES

Planning for the construction of the new library and archives building went on for decades, ever since it had become obvious the storage capacities of the existing building belonging to the University of Zagreb was not going to suffice for the increasing number of books. Lack of funds, as well as lengthy discussions about the location of the future building, delayed the works until 1909. That year, the Croatian Provincial Government organized an architectural design competition to which a total of six architects submitted their project proposals. The winning entries were those by the Zagreb architects Rudolf Lubynski and Dioniz Sunko, who shared a combined 1st and 2nd prize. Both project designs were very similar in style, emblematic of a late Art Nouveau characterized by a mixture of neoclassical and Art Nouveau elements¹ [FIG. 1](#).

Other surviving project designs show that the competition attracted some far more conservative entries in terms of style, relying on a type of architectural decoration harking back to the nineteenth century. The jury, however, opted for the more audacious designs, which reflected the willingness of the then Croatian authorities to realize the key investment in the field of public architecture according to a modern style.

The Croatian Provincial Government eventually chose Rudolf Lubynski's design for the building. Construction began during the mandate of Nikola Tomašić (1864–1918), who served as Croatian Prime Minister (Ban of the Kingdom of Croatia-Slavonia) from 1910 to 1912. He was a lawyer by profession, spoke several languages and was a passionate collector of books, which he later donated to the National and University Library in Zagreb. During his mandate as Ban, he proved to be an active and influential proponent of modern architecture. He furnished his own apartment according to the designs of the most avant-garde Croatian architect, Viktor Kovačić, a student of Otto Wagner, and also chose a modernist style to renovate the seat of the government in Zagreb, the so-called Banski Dvori. It is therefore no surprise that he was also ready to support Lubynski's design project for the library and archives building.²

Built from 1911 to 1913, the building was situated in the "Green Horseshoe" area formed by a string of squares and parks in the southwestern part of Lower Town, a district of Zagreb dating from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In order to ensure maximum fire safety, it was built partly of reinforced concrete, which was only then introduced in Croatian and Central European architecture in high-rise buildings (*Hochbau*).³

- 1 Fabijanić, N., "Combining Secession, Neo-Classicism and Modernism. Rudolf Lubynski's University Library in Zagreb", in *Prostor*, 18/1(39), 2010, pp. 2–25. Snješka Knežević, ed., *Zgrada Nacionalne i sveučilišne knjižnice u Zagrebu, 1913–2013*, Zagreb: Sveučilište u Zagrebu, 2013.
- 2 Damjanović, D., *Otto Wagner und die kroatische Architektur*, Zagreb: Moderna galerija, 2018, p. 53.
- 3 Knežević, S., *Zagrebačka zelena potkova*, Zagreb: Školska knjiga, 1996, pp. 214–234. Knežević, S., "Zgrada Nacionalne i sveučilišne knjižnice u Zagrebu", in Gašparović, M., ed., *Secesija u Hrvatskoj*, Zagreb: Muzej za umjetnost i obrt, 2003–2004, pp. 93–105.

OSNOVA „PROPRIO MARTE“ (ARH. LUBYNSKI).

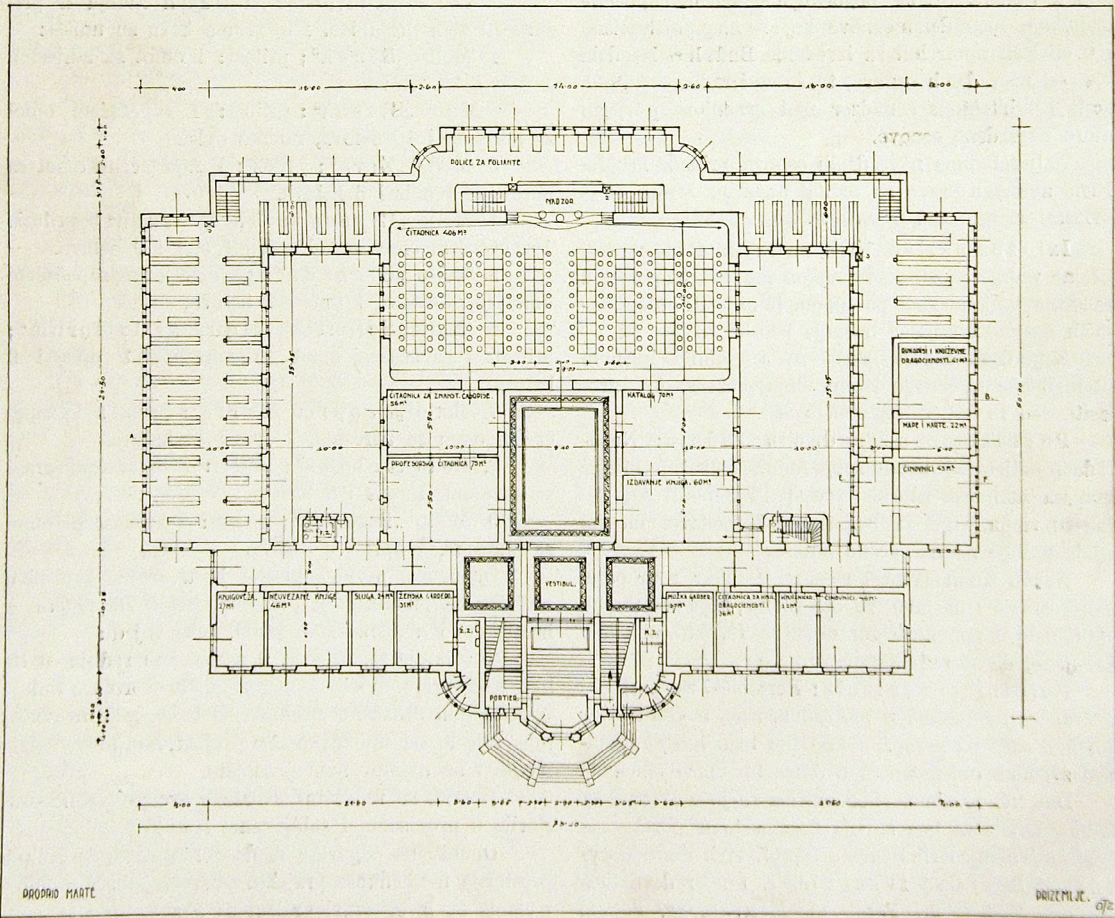
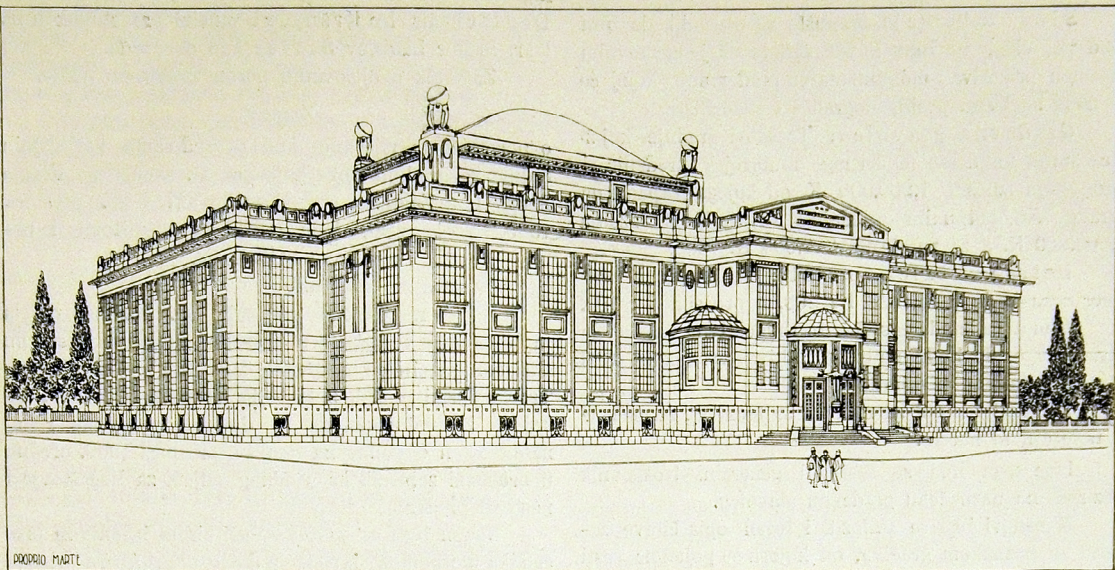


FIG. 1 Rudolf Lubynski, Competition design for the National and University Library and State Archives, 1909; published in: *Viesti Hrvatskoga društva inžinira i arhitekta u Zagrebu*, XXXI/1 (February 1, 1910), 4.

Rudolf Lubynski studied architecture in Karlsruhe between 1896 and 1899, and then joined the studio of the well-known architect and professor, Josef Durm, between 1900 and 1905, when Jugendstil had already taken root in German architecture. He continued to work in Germany until 1907, specializing in a late Art Nouveau style/ Jugendstil that was a combination of neoclassical elements and motifs of geometric and organic Art Nouveau. He maintained this style after returning to Croatia, as can be seen on the façades of the Library and the State Archives building.⁴ Although neoclassical pilasters dominate the façades, closer inspection shows that Lubynski modified to a greater or lesser extent the motifs of the classical architectural heritage, which also characterizes the building's interior design.

Given the size of the building and the limited scope of this text, most attention will be paid to architectural analysis and the programme of furnishings of the three main spaces in the building, namely, the entrance hall and staircase, the professors' reading room and the main reading room [FIG. 2–3]. Although all three spaces exhibit an interplay of neoclassical and Art Nouveau elements, neoclassical motifs are clearly more dominant in the professors' reading room — no doubt because the architect wished to tailor the decoration of the room to the taste of the users, professors of the University of Zagreb. The two other rooms are mostly decorated with Art Nouveau motifs.

The main spaces of the building reflect the influence of Lubynski's contemporaries, the key representatives of Art Nouveau in Vienna — Otto Wagner, Josef Hoffmann and Adolf Loos — but also that of other representatives of European and especially German Art Nouveau, whom Lubynski knew from architectural magazines or had met while living in Germany.

For the library's various walls, ceilings and floors Lubynski used a range of materials having natural features suitable for decorative schemes. The walls of the foyer are covered with different sorts of colourful marble and plaster and were partly gilded; the doors are crowned with brass gables, while copper flowerpots decorate the staircase and the entrance hall. Multi-coloured stone, laid out in the form of geometric mosaics, was used to pave the entrance hall, while in the reading rooms the floor is covered with wooden parquet, doubtless in order to reduce the noise caused by walking. In both reading rooms the lower section of the walls is clad with wooden panels, but ceramic pilasters appear on the upper sections in the large reading room only. Walls in restrooms are covered with ceramic tiles. To introduce natural light in the interior, Lubynski pierced the ceilings and walls with numerous windows.

The fact that all the furnishings were designed by Rudolf Lubynski makes the building of the Croatian National and University Library and State Archives a true example of the Art Nouveau *Gesamtkunstwerk*, entirely created around a single concept in a relatively short period of time.

THE ICONOGRAPHIC PROGRAMME OF INTERIOR DECORATION

Since the construction of the building was funded by the Croatian government, its iconographic programme reflects the political views of the ruling classes and academic dignitaries of the day, notably the aforementioned Ban Nikola Tomašić and the first Croatian art historian, Isidor Kršnjavi, who oversaw the procurement of artworks for the building's interior.

Sculptures and paintings, installed both inside and on the façades, emphasized on the one hand the role of the building as a temple of Croatian history, and on the

⁴ Fabijanić, "Combining Secession, Neo-Classicism and Modernism", op. cit.

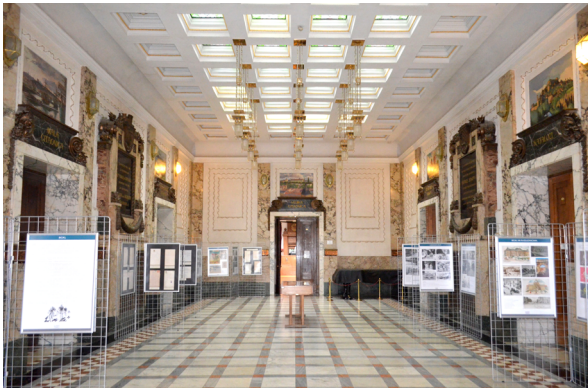


FIG. 2 Entrance hall of the National and University Library and State Archives, built in 1911–1913 © Dragan Damjanovic.



FIG. 3 Professors' reading room of the National and University Library and State Archives with Robert Auer's painting *Athena* (1913) © Dragan Damjanovic.

other, its role as a universal temple of knowledge. On the north façade of the building, facing the seat of the University of Zagreb, sculptor Robert Frangeš Mihanović created allegorical reliefs depicting the faculties that constituted the university at the time, while sculptor Rudolf Valdec made the *Allegory of Education* on the tympanum of the south façade.

The national segment of the iconographic programme was particularly prominent in the great entrance hall, where paintings showing crucial topoi of Croatian cultural and political history (Zagreb, Dubrovnik, Jajce, Senj and Đakovo) were hung above the doors leading to the main rooms of the building. They express an ideal political message showing the boundaries of the territory considered Croatian, for they include cities that were not within the political borders of Croatia (Jajce and Dubrovnik) at that time.

The main reading room contains national and universal topics alike. The universality of knowledge is emphasized by Mirko Rački's paintings representing ancient, medieval and contemporary science, and Rudolf Valdec and Mira Wod's reliefs depicting classical philosophers and *putti* holding books. On the other hand, the particularities of Croatian cultural history are represented by Vlaho Bukovac's canvas *Development of Croatian Culture*. Wall paintings in the professors' reading room present only universal topics. This room contains Ivan Tišov's compositions featuring the *Artes Liberales* and *Scientiae Naturales* — *Scientiae Scholasticae*, to underscore the building's vocation as a house of the arts, humanities and (natural) sciences [FIG. 4](#).

The leitmotif of the iconographic programme of the entire building is an owl, symbol of the Greek goddess Athena, and as such, a symbol of knowledge and wisdom which was skilfully incorporated into the architectural elements of the building (sculptures around the dome in the exterior, capitals of the columns in the main entrance hall). Athena also appears in Robert Auer's painting in the professors' reading room.⁵

FURNITURE AND FITTINGS

Croatian government funding of the project encouraged the involvement of Croatian artists, painters, sculptors and craftsmen in its furnishings. Croatia was then a semi-autonomous province within the Hungarian part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, which, according to the Croato-Hungarian Settlement from 1868, ceded to the Croatian government complete and independent control of the construction of public buildings intended for educational and cultural use. To support the local economy, the government regularly used similar state-funded projects to create

⁵ Kružić Uchytíl, V., "Likovni opus u Nacionalnoj i sveučilišnoj knjižnici u Zagrebu", in *Secesija u Hrvatskoj*, op. cit, pp. 107–113.



FIG. 4 Main reading room of the National and University Library and State Archives with chandeliers executed by the firm Nicolaus Mundt from Vienna and Vlaho Bukovac's painting Development of Croatian Culture (1912–1913) © Dragan Damjanovic.

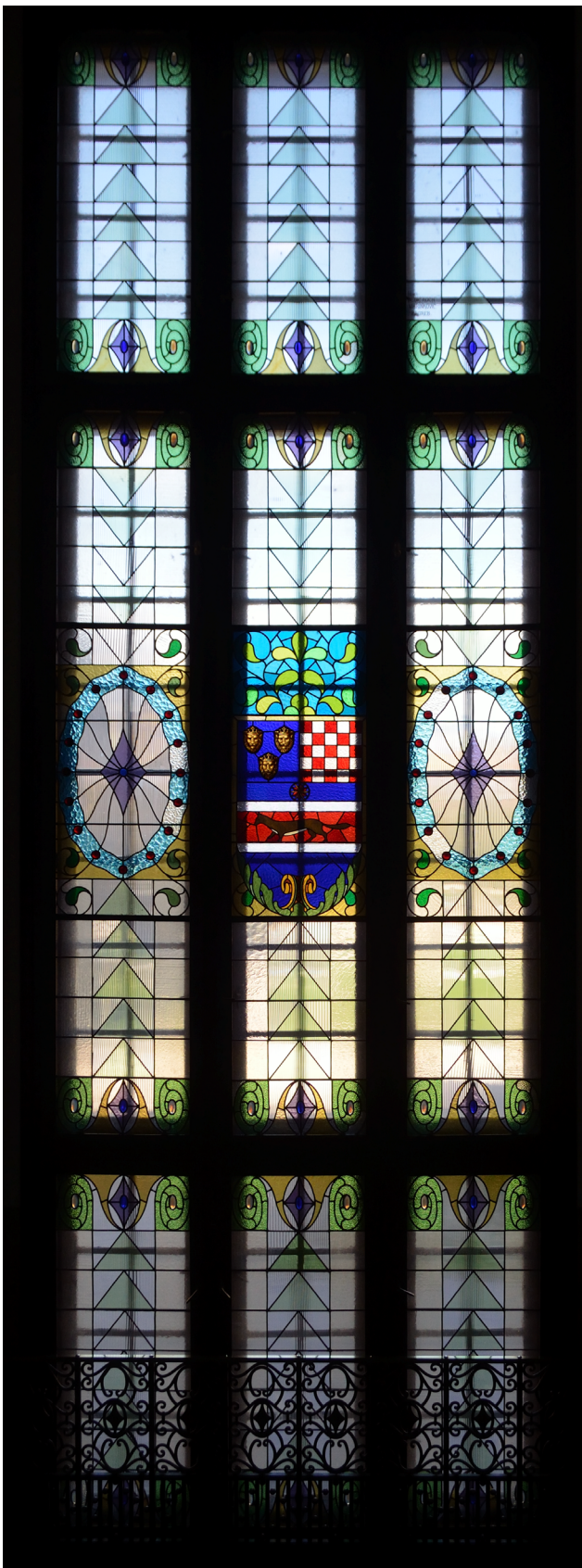


FIG. 5 Stained glass windows at the main staircase of the National and University Library and State Archives with the coat of arms of the Triune Kingdom of Croatia, Slavonia and Dalmatia (official name of Croatia in the period), executed by the firm Koch and Marinković from Zagreb, ca. 1913 © Dragan Damjanovic.

employment opportunities for students and teachers of the Zagreb Craft School (founded in 1882), which trained a number of skilled carpenters, metalsmiths, ceramists, stone-cutters, painters, sculptors and other craftspeople. Among the works of Zagreb artisans who contributed to the interior of the National and University Library and State Archives building were Isidor Haramija's metal furnishings (flowerpots, metal radiator covers, stair railing) and Alexander Maruzzi's tin pieces.

While applied art, thanks to the Craft School, flourished in fin-de-siècle Croatia, the so-called art industry (*Kunstindustrie*) remained underdeveloped, primarily because Croatian companies had to compete with the key industrial centres of Austria-Hungary (Lower Austria, Bohemia and central Hungary). As a result, relatively few industrial products for the building in question's interior were made by national companies. The most developed industry in Croatia was the furniture industry, due to the fact that the country was still rich in forests, especially oak trees. The building's furniture, therefore, was largely supplied by Zagreb-based companies (such as Bothe & Ehrmann). Croatian companies also made the ceramic pilasters for the large reading room (Zagorka Factory in Bedekovčina), ceramic tiles for the sanitary facilities (Armin Schreiner Company, Zagreb), and most of the stained glass and mosaics (Koch & Marinković Company, with glassworkers Dević and Gnezda). Since Koch & Marinković was founded in 1910, a year before work began on the library and archives building, the company did not have the capacity to take on the entire order. Therefore the stained-glass windows of the main reading room, catalogue rooms, and parts of other rooms were entrusted to Carl Geyling, a more experienced Vienna-based firm. Finally, since there was nowhere in Croatia capable of producing lighting fixtures, chandeliers and table lamps, these were entirely manufactured by Nicolaus Mundt in Vienna, though following Lubynski's designs [FIG. 5-6].

Lubynski designed a particular line of furniture for each room, so that the same chandeliers, table lamps, wooden furniture, stained glass or stucco patterns would not be found in two different rooms in the building.

CONCLUDING WORDS

Because the building has always been state property, the original inventory has been almost entirely preserved. After the National and University Library moved into new premises in 1996, Lubynski's building continued to serve exclusively as an archive. The same year, major restoration works on the façades and the interior began, supervised by conservators.⁶ While the main interior spaces have now been restored, the catalogue rooms and numerous other archival spaces still await their turn.⁷ ●

6 Milošević, V., *Restauratorski radovi na palači Lubynski. U povodu obilježavanja 100. obljetnice izgradnje*, Zagreb: Hrvatski državni arhiv, 2013.

7 This work has been supported in part by Croatian Science Foundation under the project IP-2018-01-9364, "Art and the State in Croatia, from the Enlightenment to the Present".



FIG. 6 Stained glass windows at the main staircase of the National and University Library and State Archives with the coat of arms of the city of Zagreb, executed by the firm Koch and Marinković from Zagreb, ca. 1913 © Dragan Damjanovic.

