

we feel all the more his human kindness towards all who were suffering under national, political, cultural and economic hegemonism, particularly under Fascism and capitalism.

The catalogue containing studies and reproductions of the works of art included in the exhibition is accompanied by a comprehensive *Catalogue of Documented Works*, which represents an introductory step in the direction of further research. Practically every work could be the subject of detailed iconographic and stylistic analysis, and interpretations could be broadened to infinity. May this present study thus serve as an introduction to the understanding of these numerous images that defy the march of time.

Each work cited is accompanied by a catalogue number – e.g. cat. no. 1 – representing the serial number of the documented and recorded work in the *Catalogue of Documented Works*.

## Childhood and youth

**H**inko Smrekar was the son of poor parents of peasant stock. His father Janez Smrekar (16 July 1847–6 January 1909) and mother Marijana Kern (29 April 1852–1 January 1927) were married on 4 September 1871. They began their married life in the village of Javor, in the hills east of Ljubljana, where their daughter Marija (24 May 1873–?) and son Janez (31 May 1875–22 March 1950) were born.

They later moved to Ljubljana, the capital of the Duchy of Carniola, where two more sons were born: Henrik (13 July 1883–1 October 1942) and Pavle (1 July 1889–7 or 8 May 1911).<sup>2</sup> The family remained in Ljubljana until 1904, when they moved to Kranj, then a growing centre in the northern part of the Duchy.<sup>3</sup>

In 1927 Henrik Smrekar began writing his autobiography, which he also planned to illustrate.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately he never completed the work. All that

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<sup>2</sup> Thanks are due to Tone Krampač of the Archdiocesan Archive in Ljubljana for supplementing and verifying the information.

<sup>3</sup> At the time of Smrekar's birth, Carniola was a crownland of the multi-ethnic Austro-Hungarian Empire. The state, which had been under Habsburg rule for centuries, was divided into Austrian and Hungarian parts and the Slovenians, as a nation or ethnic group, represented less than three per cent of the population. Slovenians were only a majority in Carniola, although they also represented an important minority in the neighbouring provinces.

<sup>4</sup> *Dni mojih lepša polovica / Avtobiografija I.* del. od l. 1883–1903 / Napisal in narisal / H. S. [The Better Half of My Days / Autobiography, Part I, 1883–1903 / Written and drawn by / H. S.], 10 March 1927, copy (National Gallery, Fonds D, NG D 145-1); SMREKAR 1952; DOBIDA 1957, pp. 35–42.

has survived is a draft of the introduction, where he recorded memories of his earliest childhood up to the age of twelve, from which we learn a great deal about him and his family.

He wrote that at the age of two he experienced a tremendous spiritual commotion, something that would remain with him for the rest of his life, as vivid as though it had happened yesterday. The cause of his agitation was the interior of the Church of the Annunciation, the Franciscan church, which from that moment on became his personal paradise. Every time he passed the church with his parents, he would scream and stamp his feet, so they had no choice but to go in. (Fig. 1) His mother would have to pick him up, to enable him to see better. The chief attraction was *The Transfiguration of Christ* by Matevž Langus, a painter of the Biedermeier period. As Smrekar himself put it: “I had to be forcibly dragged away from there. It still draws me powerfully today – the mystery of that concavity.”<sup>5</sup> (Fig. 2)



Fig. 1: Hinko Smrekar, *Self-Portrait in Mother's Arms*, 1927, location unknown

At the age of four he experienced another spiritual commotion, this time accompanied by a genuine revelation, when among the toys left behind by his playmate Rici, who had just died, he found some printed drawing templates and a number of copies made using them that had apparently been drawn by Rici's mother. He pored over these sheets with such absorption that he forgot about everything else – even sweets and his own mother. From that moment on he drew whenever he could. He soon found an almanac, an old calendar, a dream book and a fragment of the caricatures of Wilhelm Busch<sup>6</sup>, which became his art gallery and academy all in one – “along with the Franciscan church and St James's and the market of the woodcutters from Ig in the square by the latter.”<sup>7</sup>



Fig. 2: Matevž Langus, *The Transfiguration of Christ*, Franciscan Church of the Annunciation, Ljubljana

<sup>5</sup> *Dni mojih lepša polovica / Avtobiografija I.* del. od l. 1883–1903 / Napisal in narisal / H. S. [The Better Half of My Days / Autobiography, Part I, 1883–1903 / Written and drawn by / H. S.], 10 March 1927, copy (National Gallery, Fonds D, NG D 145-1); SMREKAR 1952; DOBIDA 1957, pp. 35–42. In his memoirs, Smrekar mentions one of Langus's last frescoes in the Franciscan church (it can be found in the second chapel on the north side). The work is *The Transfiguration of Christ* – a scene copied from the last painting by Raphael, which Vasari described as the Italian Renaissance master's “most beautiful and most divine work”. The painting is the first example in art history of a work that combines the subject of the Transfiguration with the biblical story of the freeing of a boy from demonic possession. The composition is considered to anticipate the Baroque and was admired for centuries, including by Goethe, who said of it: “The two are one: below, suffering and need; above, effective power, succour. Each bearing on the other, both interacting with one another.” (MENAŠE 1971, pp. 2026–2027)

<sup>6</sup> Wilhelm Busch (1832–1908) was a German humorist, poet, illustrator, and painter best known for the drawings that illustrated his poems and tales. *Max and Moritz*, his humorous illustrated story for children in verse, has been translated into Slovenian multiple times under different titles: *Cipek in Capek* (1929), *Picko in Packo* (1980) and *Jošt in Jaka* (1991). Smrekar was apparently most influenced by Busch's work *Die fromme Helene* (Pious Helen).

<sup>7</sup> *Dni mojih lepša polovica / Avtobiografija I.* del. od l. 1883–1903 / Napisal in narisal / H. S. [The Better Half of My Days / Autobiography, Part I, 1883–1903 / Written and drawn by / H. S.], 10 March 1927, copy (National Gallery, Fonds D, NG D 145-1); SMREKAR 1952; DOBIDA 1957, pp. 35–42.

## Life and Work

He was never bored as a child, nor later in life either, if he was alone. Apparently his mother did not find solitude dreary either and instead saw it as a good-natured friend. (Fig. 3) She was an attentive and loving woman, while his father never concerned himself much with the family. Although a man of many talents, he was never diligent or steadfast. As a youth he worked as a linen weaver, then as a pot-binder (mending cracked pots with wire) and clockmender. Later on, and until the end of his life, he worked as a porter. He was also successful as a *postillon d'amour*, which in those days brought him a good income. He was incapable of thrift and frequently squandered the family's income. His passion was the lottery, because he dreamt of getting rich quickly. He even had a magic book containing various formulas said to compel the devil to bring a bag of gold coins and he became a veritable Delphic oracle to all the other lottery players. At one time he set up as a barber and "dentist" using tools that were like something from the Spanish Inquisition. His children helped him by holding the patient down.



Fig. 3: Davorin Rovšek, *Marijana Smrekar*, Hinko's mother, 1899, National and University Library, Ljubljana

Hinko admitted that he did not miss his father when he was away from home, and it was also easier for his mother when his sister Marija, known as Mica, started to earn money by taking in sewing, which mother and daughter then did together. When Hinko was eight years old, the family moved into the house of the jurist and benefactor Franc Munda, where his mother was employed as housekeeper. She had to work very hard but she was happy, although the illness of Hinko's brother Pavle brought new worries. Initially a very healthy child, he began to suffer from spinal deformation as a consequence of rickets. His mother sought the help of every doctor she could find and went on every pilgrimage she could think of. (Fig. 4)



Fig. 4: Unknown, *Pavle Smrekar*, Hinko's brother, National and University Library, Ljubljana

In 1895, when Hinko was twelve years old, Ljubljana was struck by a powerful earthquake.<sup>8</sup>

Smrekar wrote an account of the event much later on, in 1936: "That was a sight to see! People lying on the ground in heaps. People in various states of dress and undress like carnival figures. Everyone just grabbed whatever was closest to hand and put it on: men wearing items of women's clothing and women wearing items of men's clothing. Lights, candles, lanterns flickered along the Gradaščica stream. Women rattling rosary beads as though for a bet. From time to time a roaring sound would be heard again, the earth would shake and bricks and chimneypots would tumble from roofs."<sup>9</sup> In the aftermath of the earthquake, the family lived a gypsy life, cooking in the open air

8 This Easter tragedy represents one of the most important turning points in Ljubljana's history, since the rebuilding work also brought modernisation. Artistic, economic and political contacts with the other Slavic peoples of the monarchy also grew stronger in this period, particularly with the Czechs, who were the most numerous.

9 SMREKAR 1936b.

and sleeping in cabbage tubs.<sup>10</sup> The young Henrik found the whole business fascinating and at night would gaze at the moon from his tub and make up stories about brigands. Later they went to sleep in a barn in Mestni Log where, lying in the hay, Henrik could listen to the jokes and stories that people told each other, and to singing and the sound of the zither.<sup>11</sup> In 1939 he recreated this youthful memory in the painting *Church Street after the Earthquake* (cat. no. I611).

As a child he sucked up all these impressions like a sponge and the people he saw in his childhood and described in his biography are visible in the broad range of figures we later encounter in his drawings – unknown men with shaggy beards and pretty, plump women from the inns, where his father sometimes took him; old Ižanc the policeman, ever upright and watchful, whose grey “snake” eyes flashed cold sparks; the old female “chimney sweep” – actually a drunken distillery worker, a big, strong woman who used to come tottering over St James’s Bridge from the Stari Trg distillery and then “preach” the kind of stories that were not for children’s ears; a vinegar seller from the Čičarija district of Istria, wearing traditional costume – a regular visitor; a deranged, grotesquely dressed female beggar called Ujtata carrying a box that was said to contain a doll and other junk; an Italian with a monkey dressed as a soldier; a one-man band; working girls from the tobacco factory, scrawny and pale, who came to the house to have their teeth pulled by Hinko’s father, and so on. Hinko’s home was also close to the law courts, where he had the opportunity to observe the comings and goings of all manner of interesting individuals.

## Education and departure for Vienna

Smrekar attended the Second Municipal Elementary School for Boys in Graben, which immediately left a negative impression on him because of the strictness of the teachers. Despite this, he learned his lessons without any problems, so his teachers and his mother were satisfied. The only interest his father took in his schooling was to use his first-year school report to light his pipe. His classmates included the future sculptor Svitoslav Peruzzi, with whom he stayed in touch even after leaving school.

Reminiscing about his school days, Smrekar offered the following musings: “What kind of life is this and what good does school do? Almost all of my classmates, who in those days were first-rate scoundrels unable to count to 50, today count only in banknotes of 1,000 and drive past me scornfully in

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<sup>10</sup> The cabbage tubs were lent by Franc Jakopič, a wealthy produce merchant, who was the father of the Slovenian Impressionist painter Rihard Jakopič.

<sup>11</sup> SMREKAR 1936b.

## Life and Work

their cars. In those days I was the outstanding one – if I wasn't always top of the class I was at least second.”<sup>12</sup>

He attended secondary school in Ljubljana and his marks were always “very good” or “excellent”. He was popular among his classmates because he frequently drew caricatures of the teachers, which his classmates would then pass among themselves under their desks. This was a risky business, of course, and Smrekar once even risked expulsion. On 11 July 1901 he sat the school-leaving examination and passed with distinction. (Figs. 5, 6)

He wanted to study medicine but because of his lack of money, and with hopes of a scholarship from the Knafelj Foundation, he decided that same year to study law in Innsbruck, in the Austrian state of Tyrol, where he remained for the winter and summer semesters of the 1901/1902 academic year.<sup>13</sup> Several illustrated postcards sent by Smrekar to Anton Mrak and others during his time in Innsbruck have survived. The postcards are written in pure Ljubljana dialect (cat. nos 3–14). (Fig. 7)

In a postal card to Anton Mrak, Smrekar wrote that Innsbruck was the “*Arschloch der Welt*”<sup>14</sup> and that a Carniolan could not be happy there, particularly if alone.<sup>15</sup> He also mentioned a scholarship worth 140 crowns that he had received after six months, and wrote that he would now be able to continue his studies in Vienna.

In the autumn of 1902 he set off to Vienna and enrolled at the Faculty of Law. His first semester in Vienna was actually his third semester as a law student. The scholarship he had mentioned to his friend was one awarded by the Kraškovič Foundation, which he had received for the winter and summer semesters of the 1902/03 academic year. In his application for the scholarship, Smrekar stated that he was forced to find work as a private tutor (*Hofmeister*) in Innsbruck.<sup>16</sup>



Fig. 5: Davorin Rovšek, *Hinko Smrekar*, 1899, National and University Library, Ljubljana



Fig. 6: Unknown, Group photograph from the secondary school, private collection

12 *Dni mojih lepša polovica / Avtobiografija I.* del. od l. 1883–1903 / Napisal in narisal / H. S. [The Better Half of My Days / Autobiography, Part I, 1883–1903 / Written and drawn by / H. S.], 10 March 1927, copy (National Gallery, Fonds D, NG D 145-1); SMREKAR 1952; DOBIDA 1957, pp. 35–42.

13 He lived at Schneeberggasse 16/II in the Hötting district.

14 “Rectum of the world”.

15 Illustrated postcards to Anton Mrak, 1902 (National Gallery, Fonds D, NG D 136–1-4).

16 Akten des Akademischen Senats GZ 1711, 1902–1903 and GT 2512, 1902–1903, where it is