

A guided tour of the exhibition with the curator:
Saturday, 31 April 2022, at 10:00.



Ljubljanski
muzej

Exhibition Colophon:
Zoran Smiljanić: Comics

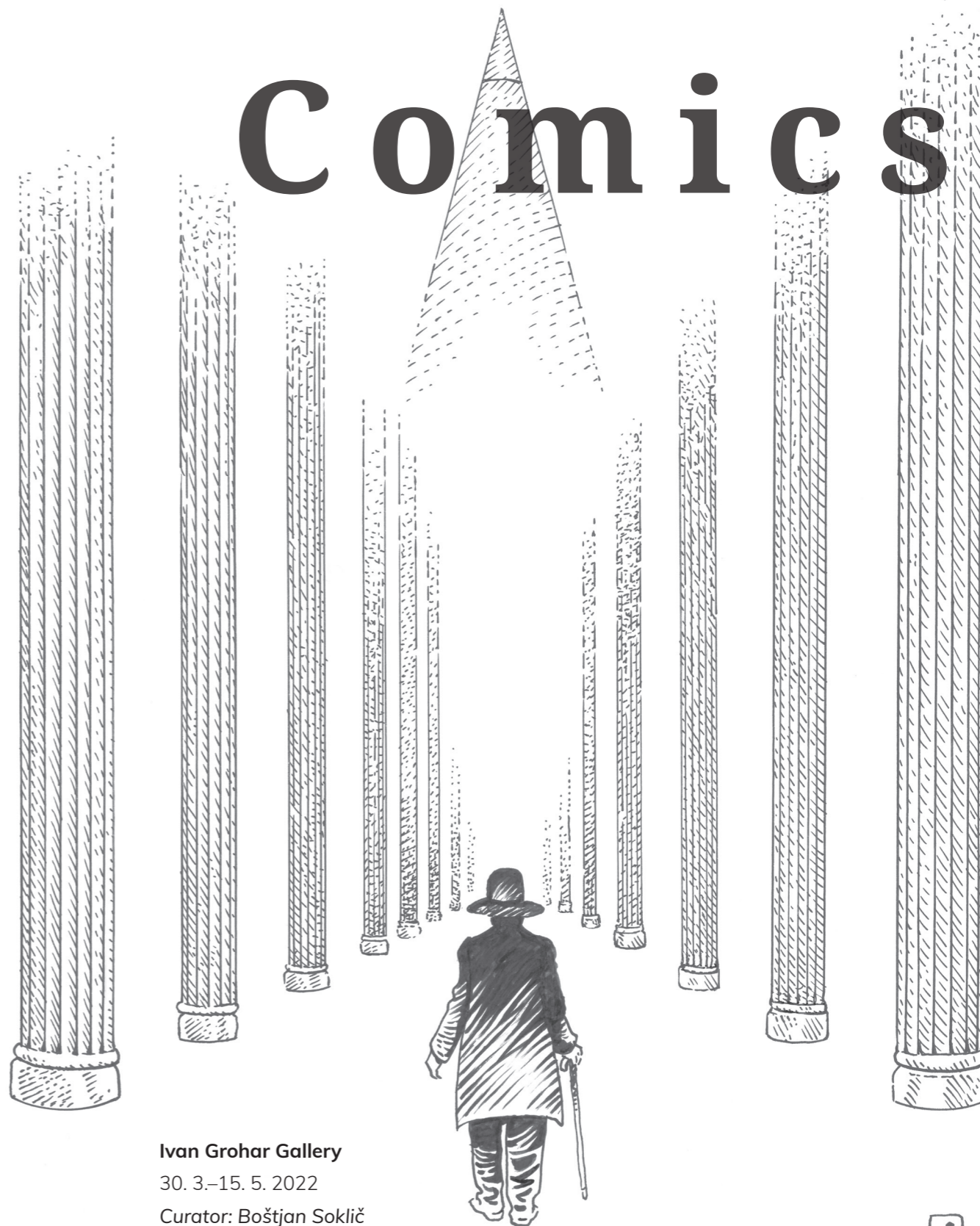
30. 3.–15. 5. 2022
Ivan Grohar Gallery
Škofja Loka Museum

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Zoran Smiljanić

Comics



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Konec. 127
BLAŽ VURNIK & ZORAN SMILJANIĆ © 2021



The Ivan Grohar Gallery presents the Kranj-born visual artist, comic artist, illustrator, caricaturist, script writer and publicist Zoran Smiljanić and a selection of his original comic strips from comic books. Smiljanić is a member of the so-called third generation of Slovenian comic strip artists, who were selected as contributors to the *Mladina* magazine by journalist and photographer Ivo Štandekar in the second half of the 1980s. Apart from Smiljanić, other prominent artists that are part of this generation are Tomaž Lavrič, Iztok Sitar, Dušan Kastelic, Gorazd Vahen, Zvonko Čoh and others.

With his comics created for the *Mladina* magazine between 1987 and 1991, Smiljanić established new standards of Slovenian comics (*Hardfuckers*). As a comic strip artist, he does not use digital media, much preferring to draw and colour scenes by hand. Smiljanić's oeuvre is very extensive and the exhibition thus presents those of his works that have attracted most public attention, i.e. two biographical comics and other comic materials related to real historical events. The exhibition features his most acclaimed works from the past two decades. These works deal with the lives of well-known Slovenians (writer Ivan Cankar, architect Jože Plečnik) and various bygone time periods that were relevant for the Slovenian nation and were characterised by historical twists and turns, and dramatic events (*Meksikajnarji*, *Črni plamen*). The exhibited works include thirty-six comic panels from the artist's different creative periods, a poster, as well as some selected sketches and croquis drawings.

The first gallery room features comic panels created to mark the 150th anniversary of the birth of the famed Slovenian architect Jože Plečnik. With their comic titled *Plečnik in pika* (*Plečnik, Full Stop*), comic artist Zoran Smiljanić and script writer Dr Blaž Vurnik, a historian and curator at the City Museum of Ljubljana, paid tribute to Plečnik's personality in an extremely original way. The story of Plečnik's life is told by Plečnik himself, who presents his own view of who he was and his work. The comic book with its multifaceted rhythm follows the architect's creative path from Vienna via Prague to Ljubljana. The comic book is more than just a presentation of Plečnik's rich oeuvre, it also reveals his views on architecture, societal happenings and his inner world. Vurnik's script is the result of an in-depth study of scientific literature, Plečnik's legacy and an analysis of his personality. As for Smiljanić, he has masterfully translated the complexity of Plečnik's character and his various projects into the language of comic strips. The virtuosity of his drawings is revealed through a meticulous artistic depiction of architecture and

specific building details, which puts a special stamp on Plečnik's artistic contributions. Smiljanić's comic panels are complemented with his Plečnik-themed sketches and croquis drawings, which speak volumes about the initial stage of his artistic process.

Other works exhibited alongside Plečnik-themed ones are the images from the life of the greatest Slovenian writer and playwright Ivan Cankar. They are likewise the result of a successful collaboration between Smiljanić and Blaž Vurnik, who is an expert on Cankar's life and work. He has contributed, among other things, various meaningful quotes from Cankar's works. Smiljanić depicted Cankar's life in his signature realist style, which – in perfect harmony with the content – sometimes deviates slightly from realism, using elements of caricature, symbolism and surrealism. These “deviation zones” reveal Smiljanić's drawing-style spectrum in full. This is not merely a minimised depiction of the character and melancholic-looking appearance of the artist with a bushy moustache and a vague look that all Slovenians are so well familiar with. It is a vivid journey back to the time that is not even so very remote and a journey to a momentous period that left a mark on Slovenian history in more ways than one. The imprint these fateful events left on Slovenians is still very much visible. On the visual level, the story told in the comic book may be black and white, its content, however, is filled with kaleidoscopic curiosities about both Cankar and his contemporaries.

The older comic panels exhibited in the first gallery room include a comic book titled *Meksikajnarji* (*The Mexicans*), which is an epic saga about the Slovenian volunteers who fought for Maximilian I of Mexico, the brother of Emperor Franz Joseph I of Austria, in Mexico between 1864 and 1867. The comic book follows two parallel stories: an authentic biography of Maximilian and a fictional story of a peasant student called Tone Bruce, who takes part in a military expedition to Mexico. Due to the large volume of pages and complex research work, Smiljanić's comic book was created in collaboration with co-script writer Marijan Pušavec, a writer and librarian. For the sake of visual consistency in the depiction of objects, uniforms, customs and places where these real-life events had taken place, Smiljanić travelled to Mexico and explored the main locations on the spot. Another interesting thing about this comic book is that it was coloured by means of a demanding and time-consuming combined technique consisting of tempera, watercolour, coloured pencils and ink, which is reflected in expressive colours and colour layers. Smiljanić's love of film and his

tendency to introduce film scenes into the comic strip medium can also be felt in the way locations are framed and depicted.

The second gallery room features comic panels with scenes from the *Črni plamen* (*Black Flame*) comic book. Smiljanić used a combination of fiction and real historical facts to commemorate the centenary of the arson attack on the Trieste National Hall (Narodni dom). The story is presented through the eyes of two young boys, an Italian and a Slovenian.

The comic book presents Trieste at a time when it was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the growing tension between the Italian and Slovenian-Croatian communities, the outbreak of World War I and its aftermath, the collapse of the empire, the new Yugoslav state, the underhand political dealings, the emergence of great powers and the rise of fascism, which is brutally manifested when the Trieste National Hall is burnt to the ground. The *Črni plamen* comic book is a collaboration between Zoran Smiljanić as a comic artist and his son Ivan, a historian, who worked on the comic as a consultant and co-script writer. The two creators illuminate the dramatic events with great zeal and ambition, yet with a well-thought-out dramaturgy. They take into account different, sometimes contrasting interpretations, leaving it to the readers to come up with their own explanations.

Apart from the *Črni plamen* comic panels, the second gallery room presents fragments of the iconic comics *Zadnja vojna* (*The Last War*) and *Zadnji let Toneta Marlaka* (*Tone Marlač's Final Flight*), which deal with the Slovenian War of Independence, and a comic titled *Cvetje v jeseni* (*Autumn Flowers*) from the *Slovenski klasiki* (*Slovenian Classics*) cycle. Smiljanić is also presented as the creator of numerous posters. The poster that caused the most furore is the 1987 poster titled *Tedna mladih ne bo!* (*The Youth Week Has Been Cancelled!*), which was a source of annoyance for the Yugoslav Army's General Staff in Belgrade. Also on view are the posters for two Slovenian feature films, namely *Ljubljana* and *Oglaševanje* (*Advertising*), directed by Igor Šterk, as well as posters for the *Novi rock 1994* and *Novi rock 3.0* (2011) rock festivals. The selection of Smiljanić's works is supplemented with a poster – which also served as a cover for the book edition – for the *Meksikajnarji* comic.

Zoran Smiljanić has gone down in the history of Slovenian comics with works that are an outstanding combination of historical facts, fictional characters and individual events that are part of the stories. He

presents the often uninteresting historical facts and difficult-to-understand information in a clear, simple and comprehensive manner, exhibiting dynamic drawing agility and his distinctive style. As an expert on the distant and recent domestic history, he often deals with topics that many others may find touchy and unpleasant. Faithful to its own ethical and artistic principles, he uses black-and-white comic panels to break away from the black-and-white interpretation of reality, carrying on his own search for an objective presentation of real-life events in a convincing, expressive, yet elegant and aesthetic artistic manner. Croatian writer and illustrator Darko Macan once described Smiljanić as probably the best long-story script writer in the former Yugoslavia area. He wasn't wrong.

Boštjan Soklič, Curator, Škofja Loka Museum

Zoran Smiljanić (1961), who also goes under the pseudonym of Vittorio de la Croce, graduated from the Secondary School of Design in Ljubljana in 1980. He published his first comic *Folk Against Rock* in 1981 in the Kranj-based *Glasiło KLG* bulletin. In the 1980s and 1990s, his works were published in various Slovenian and Yugoslav newspapers and magazines, including *Naprej*, *Gorenjski glas*, *Vidici*, *Yu-strip magazin*, *Pavliha*, *Delo*, *Problemi*, *Katedra*, and lastly *Mladina*, which still carries his work. Since the start of the new millennium, his work has been published in Croatia (*Q magazin*, *Kvadrat*), Macedonia (*Kreator*) and, of course, Slovenia (*Strip Bumerang*). His illustrations, caricatures and articles have been featured in numerous magazines and publications. As a regular contributor, he has created work for the magazines and newspapers *Republika*, *Primorske novice*, *Oskar*, *PC & mediji*, *Escape*, *Premiera*, *Boni*, *Kinotečnik* and *Ekran*, where he is also a member of the editorial board and author of various articles, reviews and views. He has authored three film-themed books, numerous reviews and articles. His comic *Blok* (*A Block of Flats*) was used as basis for the short feature film *Orgazmus*, which was directed by Dražen Štader. He also drew the storyboard for Miha Mazzini's short feature film *Svobodna si. Odloči se.* (*You're Free. Decide.*) and promotional comics for the films *Izhod* (*Exit*; 2013) and *Idila* (*Idyll*; 2015).