

## Leon Kojen: “Son of the Serbian Nation”\*

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Artists’ relationships with contemporary social movements, government institutions, or national ideas shape their thematic repertoire and determined exhibition policies and public engagement. This was particularly evident during turbulent political times and in regions that experienced multinational conflict. The activities of Leon Kojen (1859–1934) provide a clear example of the relationship of the artist to society and the State. Kojen was a well-known Jewish painter from Serbia who in his work incorporated Jewish themes, while also expressing a commitment to the idea of the Serbian state. In scholarship to date, this has not been addressed even though it is of particular importance to better understand the art of Leon Kojen and Serbian culture at the turn of the last century.

Leon Kojen was one of the most prominent Serbian artists of the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century (see Figure 1).<sup>1</sup> He was born in 1859 into an old Belgrade Jewish family, in the Jewish quarter of Belgrade, Jaliya. According to the preserved oral tradition, the family of Leon Kojen, some of whom were rabbis, settled in Belgrade as early as the 17th century. Leon was born into a large family and was particularly close to his brother David, who was a lawyer (see Figure 2). Even though it was predetermined in his family that he would be a tailor, Leon in his youth decided to pursue the study of painting. In Belgrade he received instruction in the fundamentals of painting from two prominent artists, Stevan Todorović and Djoka Milo-

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\* Kojen’s description of himself in an 1884 stipend petition to the Serbian government.

<sup>1</sup> On Leon Kojen, see Zora Simić-Milovanović, “Slikar Leon Koen,” *Godišnjak grada Beograda* 2 (1955): 377–428; Božidar S. Nikolajević, *Iz minulih dana: Sećanja i dokumenti* (Belgrade: Srpska akademija nauka i umetnosti, 1986), 108–09; N. Šuica, *Leon Koen: 1859–1934* (Belgrade: Jugoslovenska galerija umetničkih dela, 2001); V. Adić, “The Tragic Story of Leon Koen, the First Sephardic Painter from Belgrade: A Symbolist and Admirer of Nietzsche,” *Ars Judaica* 5 (2009): 67–84.

vanović. During these lessons, he also expanded his knowledge of the world of art and poetry. As there was no fine arts academy in Belgrade, Kojen, like other Serbian artists, went abroad. He decided to hone his painting skills in the capital of Bavaria—Munich. Munich at that time was one of the most significant Central European cultural centers with a rich artistic tradition and a very reputable Academy of Fine Arts. He enrolled in 1882. Along with his studies he engaged in the artistic life of the city. He participated in international exhibitions held in the Glaspalast (Glass Palace), and exhibited with the members of the artists' group, Phalanx, led by Wassily Kandinsky. Kojen became ill in Munich and so returned to Belgrade after the First World War. He died on 15 May 1934 and was buried in the city's Jewish cemetery.

Even though the greatest portion of his artistic effort and most significant works were created in Munich, Leon Kojen remained tightly bound to the Kingdom of Serbia and to Belgrade. In Belgrade and Serbia during the second half of the 19th century tolerance toward the Jewish community was well established. Having grown up in this atmosphere of tolerance, Leon Kojen and his brother David considered themselves to be both Serbian citizens and Serbian patriots. They were interested in the current and national political problems of Serbia, and David even participated in political life. During the First World War David fought and died as a soldier of the Serbian army.

While receiving instruction in painting, Leon Kojen was initially helped by prominent members of the Jewish community in Belgrade. They introduced him to Jewish benefactors in Munich, but he chose not to pursue this type of support. Instead, eventually he turned to the government of the Kingdom of Serbia for financial assistance and received a stipend. In his 1884 petition for a stipend, he underscored that he was writing to the Minister of Education and Religious Affairs "as a son of the Serbian nation, desiring to one day be of use to her through his work in the field of art..."<sup>2</sup> Even though Kojen did not return to Serbia at this time, while in Munich he still made a significant contribution to Serbian artistic life, and in this way he fulfilled the patriotic promise he had made in his 1884 stipend petition. In 1898 Kojen had an exhibition in the halls of Belgrade's National Assembly. The exhibition drew the attention of foreign critics and was reported in the Serbian press. The critic writing in *Brankovo Kolo* emphasized that Kojen was a native son of Serbia and that his art was characterized by originality. He noted further that this was recognizable in his motifs, the sources of which did not emanate from reality. The same writer particularly highlighted the excellence of his Jewish-themed works, *Joseph's Dream* and *Immortal Judas*. In Munich Kojen nurtured friendships with Serbian and other Slavic students and collaborated with Serbian artists and Ser-

<sup>2</sup> Simić-Milovanović, "Slikar Leon Koen," 389.

bian authorities. The well-known Croatian and Yugoslav author Antun Gustav Matoš wrote that in Munich he kept company with "only the ideal and honest Kojen." Kojen's relationship with Serbian culture can be seen in his letters. In a postcard to art historian Božidar Nikolajević on the selection and recognition of his doctoral thesis on Serbian medieval architecture, Kojen wrote that Nikolajević's dissertation was very dear to him "because of its divine esthetic which our State unfortunately lacks, or better said it is still in complete dark as opposed to other states in Europe."<sup>3</sup> It is evident that even while living in Munich Kojen felt that Serbia was his own country, whose cultural progress he supported. Moreover, Kojen demonstrated his loyalty to the Serbian state at important international exhibitions. He exhibited at the Kingdom of Serbia's pavilion at the 1900 World Exposition in Paris, showing his work as part of the artistic output of his native Serbia. Kojen also exhibited at the fourth Yugoslav Art Exhibition in 1912. The recognition that Leon Kojen received from Serbia during his life was further confirmed at posthumous exhibitions of his work in Belgrade. His works were shown in 1934 at the Jewish community center and in 1935 at the Art Pavilion.

Leon Kojen's lyrical style of painting and his entire opus emerged from his personal convictions, environment, and the times in which he created. The impact of the Symbolist style, which dominated Europe at the end of the 19th century, is recognizable in his works. The symbolic themes and his poetic style and techniques were consistent with the modernist approaches of the time. Leon Kojen was obsessed with such themes as "Joseph's Dreams," "Immortal Judas," and the "Wandering Jew." Through them he reflected on his own Jewish identity. The painting *Joseph's Dream* was one of his most prominent works. Even though he had painted this work in Munich, the Serbian public was familiar with it. A reproduction of the painting, inscribed by Kojen with the relevant biblical passage, the literary source for the painting, was presented to Božidar Nikolajević in 1897. In the inscription the painter stressed that he was bestowing this painting to "his most worthy friend, a great man and a great Serb, Mr. Svetomir Nikolajević, as a sign of eternal recognition and esteem."<sup>4</sup> According to the notes of Moša Pijade,<sup>5</sup> King Milan Obrenović was interested in purchasing *Joseph's Dream*. The king offered 12,000 dinars, but Kojen had priced the painting at 20,000 dinars. So no sale was made. In 1912 Moša Pijade, writing in the *Večernje Novosti* newspaper, informed the Serbian public that Kojen's painting *Joseph's Dream* was being

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<sup>3</sup> Nikolajević, *Iz minulih dana*, 329.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>5</sup> Moša Pijade was a Serbian Jewish artist and political theoretician.

sold because of the debts the artist had accumulated. He then urged that “Our state or any wealthy patrons, especially from the Jewish community, ... pay off Kojen’s debts ... and then negotiate with the painter for the purchase of his paintings for the National Gallery.... With this Kojen ... would be spared a fateful blow and simultaneously our National Gallery would be enriched by this masterpiece. Shall we see if we are truly a nation?”<sup>6</sup> Moša Pijade’s appeal clearly shows that Kojen was known to the Serbian public, and that there was recognition of his artistic significance.

Another significant characteristic of Leon Kojen’s approach is his use of themes from Serbian national history. As only a portion of his oeuvre has been preserved, one can only write with confidence about such extant paintings as *Lonely Graves* or *The Abduction*, and *Despot Đurađ Branković* (see Figure 3). The subject is derived from a literary source, the poetry of Vojislav Ilić. According to a list compiled by Zora Simić Milovanović, Leon Kojen worked on and drew or painted this final theme multiple times. She noted that, included in the realization of this theme, there was an oil-on-canvas painting measuring 4×3 meters, an oil sketch for this canvas, as well as a sketch done in charcoal. Milovaović also authenticated a picture as having been painted by Kojen, *Turks Abducting a Serbian Woman for the Harem*, that is most likely a variant on this same theme (see Figure 4). Kojen’s works appear to have been largely lost during the Second World War. Today, with respect to *The Abduction*, only the sketch remains. It is in the collection of the National Museum in Belgrade.

The poem by Vojislav Ilić, which inspired and prompted Kojen to create these paintings, was dedicated to the memory of the lonely grave on the banks of the Drina river, which is located “on the road toward Loznica” in Serbia. This was the grave of Jova Lazica from Zvornik, a town on the opposite bank of the Drina. Ilić writes about an event that took place during the Ottoman rule when the Christian Serb, Jova, tried to protect his sister Jelka from an assault by the Osmanli (Turk) notable, Sali Agha from Zvornik. Jova fled with his sister to the territory of Serbia, but they were overtaken by the Turkish soldiers of Sali Agha. Jova was killed, and his sister was taken to Sali Agha’s harem. Jova’s solitary grave, erected at the site of his death, stands witness to the hard days and crimes committed against the Serbs during the period of Ottoman occupation. In the preserved *Sketch for the Abduction*, Leon Kojen focused on the most dramatic and moving event in the poem. He depicts the barbaric act in which the soldiers, the Turkish bodyguards of Sali Agha of Zvornik, brutally slay a weakened Jova and violently drag his sister Jela to the harem. Jova’s murder is presented in the first section and the abduction of Jela in the

<sup>6</sup> Moša Pijade, *O umetnosti*, ed. Lazar Trifunović (Belgrade: Srpska književna zadruga, 1963), 30.

second. This event plays out on the banks of the river Drina. In the background of the painting Kojen depicts the river and the boat with the Ottoman soldiers.

The composition of the *Lonely Graves* is one of the most complex of Kojen's works. It is characterized by the number of subjects and the depiction of both the murder and the abduction, as well by the dramatic interpretation of the story. Kojen's ambitious composition takes on a larger-than-life epic character in which the brutality of the Ottoman conqueror and the tragic naïveté of the Serbian victims are prominent.

Kojen's decision to paint a scene from Serbian national history based on Ilić's poetic retelling of the story demonstrates the painter's knowledge of contemporary Serbian culture.

Vojislav Ilić (1860–94) was one of the most important Serbian poets of his time, exceptionally respected and loved by the Serbian public. Ilić died young, and a monument was erected to him later in Kalemegdan Park in Belgrade. He wrote the poem *Lonely Graves* in 1887. Ilić's poetry is recognized as characteristic of Proto-Symbolism, which certainly suited Leon Kojen's sensibilities. He grew up in Belgrade, in Dorćol close to the Jewish quarter of Jaliija. It is most likely that Kojen and Ilić knew each other. Kojen was born in 1859, and Vojislav Ilić in 1860. They were members of the same generation. Vojislav Ilić had a great affinity for the Jewish community in Belgrade. Hajim S. Davičo, the prominent Belgrade writer and diplomat, acquaintance and friend of Ilić, left remarks about their meeting in Belgrade's Jewish quarter, Jaliija. Ilić referred to the area where Belgrade's Sephardic Jews lived as "Spain," for they had come from Spain. He believed that this area of Belgrade with all its contradictions was a place of true artistic inspiration. Kojen must have been familiar with Vojislav Ilić's attitude, as well as his inclination toward the Jewish community. Therefore, the choice of motif for his picture was certainly the result of a positive association with both Vojislav Ilić and his poetry.

Another work thematically and stylistically significant in the artistic opus of Leon Kojen is his painting of Serbian Despot Đurađ Branković (1377–1456). Branković was the last and most tragic of Serbian rulers during the time of the destruction of the Serbian Medieval state by the Ottoman Empire. In the conflict with the Ottomans the Despot's family suffered. The Sultan blinded his sons, Stefan and Grgur, and his daughter Mara was taken to the court of Sultan Murad II to join his harem. According to family recollections, as recorded by Zora Simić, Leon Kojen watched the theatrical production *Despot Đurađ Branković* and "at the moment when they brought out onto the stage the young blinded sons of Đurađ to deliver them to their grayed father, he jumped up, trembling and with horror, loudly exclaiming: 'Beasts'..."<sup>7</sup> Clearly

<sup>7</sup> Simić-Milovanović, "Slikar Leon Koen," 406.

inspired by the play, Leon Kojen painted Despot Đurađ in one of his most tragic moments—when the Turks bring in his blinded sons. The setting for this dramatic encounter is the palace, but one that is reminiscent of a theater in an imaginary Orient. Despot Đurađ rises to embrace his blind sons. His head is raised upward in pain and agony. In the foreground, an Ottoman soldier seizes a woman, while in the background a group of Ottoman soldiers watch. Kojen painted the work in Munich, and it was reproduced in the journal *Iskra* in 1899. The commentary accompanying the picture notes that the subject is a tragic event from Serbia's past—Đurađ receiving his blinded sons Stefan and Grgur. The commentator in *Iskra* further explains that this is a study “for a large painting in color”<sup>8</sup> which unfortunately had been stolen, and it is only in this reproduction in *Iskra* that this composition of Đurađ is preserved.

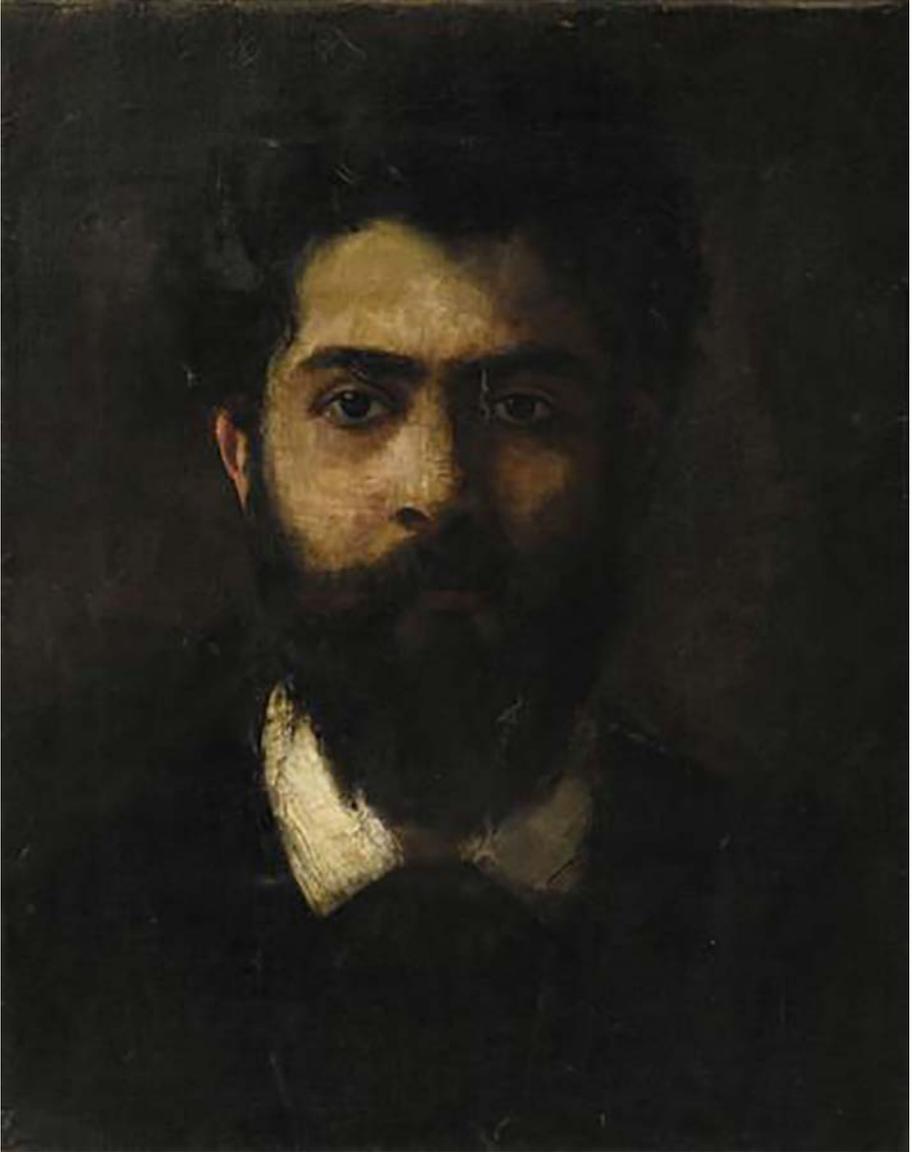
Kojen's depiction of the subject of Despot Đurađ was not fully consistent with historical information on these events. Rather, it more closely followed the theatrical presentation of the narrative. Connecting the scene of the abduction with the bringing in of the Despot's blinded sons was a construction that emphasized a horrific event from the past. Kojen showed the brutality of Ottoman rule, which he also underscored with his depiction of Despot Đurađ himself. Despot Đurađ, who embraces his blinded sons, is very reminiscent of the dramatic Hellenistic sculptural group of *Lacoön and his Sons*. Like Lacoön he bravely endures pain, which is clearly reflected in his face.

Kojen's choice and interpretation of a theme from Serbian history corresponds to the concurrent development of the Symbolist Movement's rethinking of the world. Unlike typical portrayals in paintings of historical events that glorified the nation and its past, Kojen focused on themes of tragedy, the sources of which were derived from literature. It is evident that Kojen deeply empathized with the suffering of the Serbian people during their time of slavery under their Ottoman masters. His paintings of Serbian themes with their focus on tragic events are reflective of his response.

Throughout his art and his life in Munich, Leon Kojen never stopped being “a son of the Serbian Nation.” In addition to maintaining contact with Serbian artistic and cultural circles, he painted Serbian themes. His choice of Serbian motifs is consistent with Symbolism's rethinking of the world. Kojen depicted the events of Serbia's past, which by their tragic nature gained an epic and timeless character. Moreover, his oeuvre is characterized by a singular and simultaneous merging of his Jewish religious identity and his Serbian heritage.

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<sup>8</sup> “Uz naše slike, Đurađ Branković,” *Iskra* 9 (1899): 160.



**Figure 1.** Leon Kojen, Self-Portrait, c. 1900, National Museum Belgrade (from N. Šuica, *Leon Koen: 1859–1934*).



**Figure 2.** David and Leon Kojen  
(from B. S. Nikolajević, *Iz minulih dana, sećanje i dokumenti*).



**Figure 3.** Leon Kojen, *Despot Đurađ Branković*  
(from *Iskra*, no. 9 [1899]: 151).



**Figure 4.** Leon Kojen, Sketch for "Otmica," c. 1900, National Museum of Belgrade (from N. Šuca, *Leon Kojen: 1859–1934*).