

Milena Ulčar (Montenegro), PhD candidate, Department of Art History, University of Belgrade

As a grantee of the British Scholarship Trust I had a wonderful opportunity to spend two months at University of Cambridge. Although being an art historian interested in sacral heritage of the early modern Balkans, I applied to the Faculty of History, asking for a supervisor with a rather different field of research. Since I have read some of the articles written by Professor Alexandra Walsham few years ago, my professional and personal interest in thinking about wider methodological problems of writing history in the contemporary world has become the most challenging question of my research. Without the generous support of your foundation this complex problem would have remained an obstacle more than a fruitful and prolific trigger of my current work.

In spite of being a historian widely acknowledged for her work on Protestant Britain, Professor Walsham, Head of the Department of Early Modern History at Cambridge, kindly accepted my application on multicultural and multiconfessional Balkans. Before I arrived and started to work as a part of group of her PhD students, we agreed on the most important topics that were going to be analysed during my placement there. Instead of limiting my research to specific chronological and topographical area, we agreed to widen it as much as it is possible, and to discern the most problematic steps that historians of all kinds have to recognize in order to untangle the methodological and ethical responsibilities of creating narratives in our everyday life, susceptible to various kinds of manipulations and distortions. After our meeting at her office at Trinity College questions mutated rapidly. How to deal with the past in our postmodern society, usually hostile toward any of the previously accepted “grand narratives”, reluctant to believe in linear development of ideas, critical and, even more, cynical when encountering humanism? Both of us agreed on reading material and I started to explore some of these questions through the quite colourful work of historians of the body, feminist and social history, material turn, pictorial turn and all other innovative approaches in the field of early modern history. On top of that, we arranged weekly meetings, rather pleasant discussions at Trinity College, followed by essays that I was supposed to produce after every supervision. Topics changed every week due to Professor Walsham’s careful listening and shaping my way of thinking about these issues. After writing a

book review, a historiographical experiment with use of archive material, set of dialogues inspired by writings of the most controversial historians, I was able to successfully present a research paper at the international conference *Migrations in Visual Culture* held in Belgrade in September. This congress was the product of collaboration between four Balkan universities, and, starting from this year, Belgrade became a regular member of the committee. The historical knowledge that I was able to apply to the heritage of the Balkans at the conference fully developed during those meetings at Cambridge.

Apart from the individual work I had an exceptional opportunity to test some of the ideas and problems at lunchtime workshops, while discussing with my colleagues from the department. Every fortnight we met under the supervision of Professor Walsham to exchange ideas and obstacles concerning our theoretical and field research. By participating in those challenging discussions I learned a lot about the ways in which historical knowledge could be efficiently presented to a wider audience and successfully used in promoting national heritage.

On top of the interactive and group work with professors and other PhD students at the University I was invited to participate in various seminars where guest professors shared their findings through a series of lectures, exhibitions and projects. Through this access to ground breaking scholarly, historical and art historical achievements I had the privilege to learn how interdisciplinary projects were organised from their humble beginnings to their end as the most important products of contemporary research. Along with that, Cambridge University Library provided me with the latest publications together with rare archival sources, immensely valuable for finishing my PhD dissertation.

The knowledge and experience that I acquired during the two months spent at Cambridge as a visiting graduate student can be divided in three different, yet related, categories. The first and probably the most important are personal contacts that I made during my stay. Meeting in person some of the most renowned scholars and their students allowed me to present my problem of research in an unmediated way, which was mostly impossible during our previous professional exchange. Learning and listening creative and critical suggestions regarding my work made the most precious impact on my further thinking. Collaboration and sharing, institutional as well as personal, proved to be a pledge for the future progress of historical studies. What humanities, as

the most neglected field of research in Serbia, needs is carefully planned networking and openness toward foreign institutions. By offering the widely unknown and poorly presented Balkan artistic and historical heritage as a micro example of the European multicultural and multiconfessional past this shortage could be overcome. Therefore, using my short but productive two-month period at Cambridge as a humble foundation for creating a web of professional personal and institutional ties was a rather challenging yet rewarding task.

Secondly, although related to the aforementioned, is the more technical rather than personal amount of information that I was privileged to learn during the seminars and conversations with scholars of different profiles. Conducting research and using its achievements in Cambridge is directed through research projects partly funded by international trusts, open to applicants whose topic of examination is original and neglected in contemporary scholarship. The complex process of applying through the carefully shaped manifesto could be understood as a set of steps which should be structured in order to present the international importance of the specific area of research. By listening to experienced scholars and students whose projects are internationally known I was able to understand the particular aspects of the process useful for the projects that the Department of Art History at the University of Belgrade is about to begin.

The last and equally significant outcome of my stay at Cambridge was the large body of theoretical knowledge that immensely enriched my way of thinking about the role of the historian in contemporary society. Carefully examined methodological problems and challenging historiographical questions were presented as a laboratory for the various approaches that could connect histories throughout the world. By learning how to articulate particular problems of researching, writing and sharing historical data through professional discussions with other scholars I was able to rethink approaches used for presenting the heritage of the Balkans to an international audience. The topic of my doctoral dissertation, mainly concerned with the sacral heritage of the south eastern Mediterranean, was discussed as part of a broader, dynamic culture, prone to the influences that exceed Western classical canons of representation. This allowed me to rethink the use of comparative and interdisciplinary approaches that shed new light on my research, allowing me to connect it with the work of other European scholars. This dynamic exchange has continued via emails and conference meetings after my stay at Cambridge

University was finished.

This opportunity to present my research in front of a multidisciplinary audience encouraged me to publish its outcomes in a journal widely recognised for its excellence in gathering thought-provoking historical analysis. Professor Walsham kindly accepted to read the article which I offered to *The Sixteenth Century Journal* after hearing her suggestions and comments. After a double blind review, the journal accepted it and it is about to be published in the next few months. Therefore, together with presenting a paper at an international conference in Belgrade, the acceptance of my article is a rewarding consequence of a short period spent in encouraging scholarly surroundings dedicated to excellence in research.