

## Saint Apollonia in Medieval Frescoes in Istrian Churches

Ana Kotarac Knežević<sup>1\*</sup>, Goran Knežević<sup>2</sup> and Dinko Knežević<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>DMD, PhD, Department of Oral Surgery, School of Dental Medicine, University of Zagreb, Zagreb, Croatia

<sup>2</sup>Professor of oral surgery, School of Dental Medicine, University of Zagreb

<sup>3</sup>DMD, Specialist of oral surgery, Department of Oral and Maxillofacial Surgery, Clinical Hospital Center "Dubrava", Zagreb, Croatia

\*Corresponding Author: Ana Kotarac Knežević, Department of Oral Surgery, School of Dental Medicine, University of Zagreb, Gundulićeva 5, Zagreb, Croatia.

Received: May 28, 2018; Published: June 02, 2018

### Abstract

**Introduction:** Based on a previous study carried out about the iconography of St Apollonia in Istria, the authors present only one segment of the obtained results, which are representations of the saint on medieval frescoes. Mural painting is an autochthonous art form of the central rural areas of the Istrian peninsula, which is the richest area in Croatia according to the number of preserved monuments.

**Purpose:** Since this is a forgotten art form, which was forbidden by the church and forgotten for several centuries, the authors wished to use illustrations of St Apollonia to present the original folk art form of the central part of the Istrian peninsula, the Istrian pastoral, which had enabled the folk to learn about Biblical motives and pray to patron saints of health, among which St Apollonia held an important place.

**Representation:** This study present five iconographic representations of St Apollonia on medieval frescoes in Istria.

**Conclusion:** Authors consider this to be a valuable and specific form of folk art of a small rural area where the cult of St Apollonia held an important place, and the iconography that depicts her to be an authentic picture of the area and time it was created.

**Key Words:** Ethno-dentistry; Patron saints; St Apollonia; Religion and medicine; Istria; Istrian churches

Volume 3 Issue 2 June 2018

© All Copy Rights are Reserved by Ana Kotarac Knežević, et al.

### Introduction

Istria is the westernmost county in Croatia which encompasses the majority of the Istrian peninsula with an area of 2800 km<sup>2</sup>. The entire area of the county is under the jurisdiction of the Diocese of Poreč and Pula, except for two parishes in the north which are under the jurisdiction of the Archdiocese of Rijeka. Research carried out in the Diocese of Poreč and Pula in the period from 2010 to 2015 resulted in the publishing of a monograph about the area's iconographic representations of the early Christian martyr Saint Apollonia [1].

**Citation:** Ana Kotarac Knežević, et al. "Saint Apollonia in Medieval Frescoes in Istrian Churches". *Oral Health and Dentistry* 3.2 (2018): 641-647.

The monograph presented a comprehensive view and complemented the previous knowledge about the iconography of the saint in Istrian churches. Previous researches in the area presented the iconography of the saint only partially [2,3]. There have been several hagiographic studies which presented the artistic depictions of that saint in other parts of Croatia [4-7]. The contents of the aforementioned monograph were supplemented in 2017 upon the discovery of a wooden polychrome statue of the saint in Motovun, which was known to exist, but which had not been found during the exploration of the churches. That set the final number of 27 iconographic representations of the saint, which confirms that she was very reputed and held an important place among patron saints of different diseases [8].

That is further proved by the fact that there is a church in Istria dedicated to Saint Apollonia in a small village of Katun by Gračišće near Pazin [9]. Depictions of the saint are evenly distributed over the entire peninsula, but are more common in smaller localities in central and northern Istria. That is where the poor folk lived, decimated by plague epidemics from 9<sup>th</sup> until 17<sup>th</sup> century, then malaria and diseases connected to pregnancy and infancy. At that time tooth extraction also caused pain that could be compared to little else, so the folk turned to God and numerous patron saints to protect them from different diseases. Fifty-odd plague epidemics caused the disappearance of entire village populations so churches dedicated to St Roch and St Sebastian, protectors from the plague, can be found in almost all, even the smallest, villages in Istria. Similarly, iconographic representations of St Lucy, St Agatha and St Barbara are also frequent, and St Apollonia is often presented together with one of the aforementioned patron saints. Among the 27 iconographic representations of the saint, 13 are paintings on canvas, five are found on medieval frescoes, one on a contemporary wall painting, one on a wooden altar retable, one on a marble statue, three on wooden polychrome sculptures, two on polychrome sculptures made of plaster and one in a collage technique, which is kept in a private collection.

### Aim of the Article

The aim of this article is to present the iconographic representations of St Apollonia on medieval frescoes in Istria, which is the richest area in Croatia by the number of preserved frescoes. Istrian painting on frescoes is an autochthonous art form which developed in pastoral areas in the interior of the peninsula from 11<sup>th</sup> until 16<sup>th</sup> century and was intended for poor and illiterate folk who learned about Biblical themes from the mural paintings in churches. That served as “*Biblia pauperum*” or the illustrated literature of the illiterate “*litteratura illiteratum*” which communicated with people through picture and iconography in medieval times more than ever afterwards. Churches were most commonly votive and were built to give thanks for saving a place from a certain epidemic. The few literate inhabitants left their inscriptions at those times alongside the frescoes using the first Slavic alphabet – the Glagolitic script. The Glagolitic script was spread throughout the bigger part of ethnically Croatian areas, and especially in Istria, Croatian Littoral, islands of Krk, Cres, Lošinj and Rab as well as Dalmatia. Istrian frescoes are often covered with numerous graffiti in Glagolitic script, expressing the opinions of the time about Biblical and other life topics.

### Representation of St Apollonia on Istrian Frescoes

Medieval frescoes with the depiction of St Apollonia are found:

1. in the church of Saints Peter and Paul Apostles at the cemetery in Vranja,
  2. in the church of St Roch in Draguč,
  3. in the church of St Mary of the Rocks in Beram,
  4. in the church of St Barnabas in Vižinada and
  5. in the church of St Catherine in Vodnjan.
- 
1. The Late Gothic frescoes in the church of Saints Peter and Paul Apostles at the cemetery in Vranja were made by an unknown local master, and according to the graffiti in Glagolitic script from 1474, the frescoes were created around 1470. Saint Apollonia is depicted with Virgin Mary and St Lucy (Picture 1). The fresco is fairly damaged, but the attributes of St Apollonia are clearly recognisable [1,10].

2. The church of St Roch in Draguč is a votive church, built to thank God for the end of the plague epidemic. In 1529 the local population had the church painted. The entire interior was painted, from the barrel-vaulted ceiling to the bottom of all the walls. Depictions of St Fabian, St Roch and St Sebastian are found on the altar; to the left we find images of St Eliseus and St Anthony the Great, and to the right of St Blaise and St Andrew. The left wall by the altar depicts St Apollonia and St Peter, and the right wall St Lucy and St Paul. St Apollonia can be recognised by the tongs which she holds in her right hand (Picture 2). The author of the frescoes is Anton of Padova (Padova, Padiva is the old name for today's Kašćerga, a small place in Istria near Draguč).
3. The church of St Mary of the Rocks, built by the order of the Beram confraternity of St Mary, was painted in 1474 by the workshop of the local master Vincent of Kastav. The church is located 1 km outside of Beram, at the entrance of the local cemetery. In 1963 the church was declared to be a protected cultural monument. Alongside the frescoes depicting scenes from the life of Christ, it is famous for the fresco depicting the Dance of the Dead, which represents the inevitable end of life, which everyone faces equally, regardless of their age, clerical or other social status. The frescoes are included among the most valuable works of Late Gothic folk and Slavic painting in the interior of Istria. Saint Apollonia can be found on a fresco on the north wall, left from the entrance, and she is depicted with St Leonard and St Barbara (Picture 3). In her left hand she holds tongs with a tooth.
4. The church of St Barnabas in the centre of Vižinada is painted with frescoes depicting scenes from the life of Christ. The author of the frescoes is unknown, and they were created in the second half of the 14 century. The image of St Apollonia is found on the painted frame surrounding the fresco depicting the resurrection of Christ. The fresco is fairly damaged. In her left hand the saint holds long tongs and in the right one a dish with three teeth. (Picture 4).
5. The church of St Catharine in Vodnjan is probably one of the oldest sacral objects in the town, dating from 12th century. The restoration works which started in 2012 led to the discovery of frescoes in the interior, and both the author and the date of creation are unknown. The depiction of the Creator surrounded by saints was found, as well as attributes of St Catherine whom the church is dedicated to, and a badly damaged image of St Apollonia. In her left, lowered, arm she holds a palm branch, and in the right one, which is raised to her chest, the restorers found a negative of tongs on her green cloak. The fresco is damaged in that part so the arm and tongs are not visible (Picture 5). That example has been described in our literature in 2013 [11]



**Picture 1:** A detail of a fresco with the image of St Apollonia from the church of Saints Peter and Paul Apostoles in Vranja.



*Picture 2: Fresco with the image of St Apollonia from the church of St Roch in Draguč.*



*Picture 3: A detail of the fresco with the image of St Apollonia from the church of St Mary of the Roc.*



**Picture 4:** The image of St Apollonia painted in the frame of a big fresco depicting the resurrection of Christ. It is the only example in Istria in which the saint holds teeth in a dish.



**Picture 5:** The fresco of St Apollonia from the church of St Catherine in Vodnjan. Above the halo there is a visible sign identifying the saint.

## Discussion

Mural painting in Istria ends chronologically with the painting of the interior of the church of St Roch in Draguč, which is an example of the naïve, folk derivative of the Italian Quattrocento [12]. Of those frescoes Ivančević says: “The frescoes of Anton from Kašćerga already present with Venetian Renaissance patterns, but also present the powerlessness of the rural surroundings to accept the artistic matters of the more developed centres” [12].

---

**Citation:** Ana Kotarac Knežević., *et al.* “Saint Apollonia in Medieval Frescoes in Istrian Churches”. *Oral Health and Dentistry* 3.2 (2018): 641-647.

The new status of the Catholic Church after the ecumenical council of Trent caused changes in the decoration of churches, with the desire to rid them of laic influences. Because of that there was an attempt to hide the mural paintings which were then plastered over, whitewashed or left neglected [1]. Pastoral painting and the pastoral painter disappeared. That was partly the reason why some lovely examples of mural paintings were discovered only after restorations of churches at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and some are still being discovered today [1,10,11]. That which Beale presented on a much larger area of British churches, where they found 55 iconographic representations of the saint, most commonly on glass windows and wooden panels [12], can be compared to the research published in the monograph [1]. Out of 27 found representations of the saint in the Istrian peninsula, the five which are presented here were made on medieval frescoes, which present the original pastoral art aimed at the poor, which disappeared at one point and was forgotten for several centuries. That is the reason why the examples of the saint on marble and wooden statues are not shown, nor altarpieces with the canvases of famous authors like - Angelo de Costeri [13] and less famous ones like Giovanni Corner and Venerio Trevisan. In conclusion we consider this to be a valuable and specific form of folk art of a small rural area where the cult of St Apollonia held an important place, and the iconography that depicts her to be an authentic picture of the area and time it was created.

### Acknowledgements

There are no contributors to the article other than the authors accredited. All authors have nothing to disclose and there is no conflict of interest.

### References

1. Knežević G. Saint Apollonia in churches of the Poreč and Pula diocese. Zagreb: Croatian Chamber of Dental Medicine, School of Dental Medicine University of Zagreb; (2015).
2. Hraste J., et al. "St.Apollonia, s cult in Istria". *Acta med-hist Adriat* 3.2 (2005): 199-210.
3. Kotarac Knežević A., et al. "St. Apollonia in Churches of the Poreč and Pula Dioceses". *Acta stomatologica Croatica* 46.1 (2012): 3-15.
4. Škrobonja A., et al. "St.Apollonia,s tooth-a relic in the cathedral treasury in Rab (Croatia)". *British Dental Journal* 207.10 (2009): 499-502.
5. Najžar-Flegar D., et al. "Traditional Homage to St. Apollonia in the Franciscan Order of the Province of St. Cyril and Methodius". *Acta stomatologica Croatica* 34.4 (2000): 355-360.
6. Kaić Z. "In Commemoration of the 325th Anniversary of the Altar Pala of St. Apollonia in St. Catherine,s Academic church in Zagreb". *Acta stomatologica Croatica* 34.1 (2000): 101-106.
7. Karlović D. "The Painting of saints Apollonia, Blaise, and Anthony the Abbot from the Treasury of Convent of Saint Mary in Zadar. Display of Three Patron Saints of the Oro-Facial Region". *Acta stomatologica Croatica* 40.3 (2006): 302-308.
8. Knežević G. Kotarac Knežević A. Saint Apollonia in the Church of st Anthony of Padua in Motovun ( in Croatian ). *Vjes dent med* 2 (2017): 30-33.
9. Knežević G., et al. Oral surgery, part 2 (in Croatian) 2003. Zagreb: Medicinska naklada; (2003): 47-48
10. Fučić B. Istrian Frescoes (in Croatian). Zagreb: Zora; (1963).
11. Knežević G and Kotarac Knežević A. "New Illustrations of St. Apollonia in the Churches of St. Catherine in Zagreb and Vodnjan". *Acta stomatologica Croatica* 47.1 (2013): 58-63.
12. Beal JF. "Representations of St. Apollonia in British churches". *Dental Historian* 30 (1996): 3-19.
13. Ivančević R. Art treasures of Croatia. Motovun. Beograd: Jugoslavenska revija; (1986).

**Submit your next manuscript to Scientia Ricerca Open Access and benefit from:**

- Prompt and fair double blinded peer review from experts
- Fast and efficient online submission
- Timely updates about your manuscript status
- Sharing Option: Social Networking Enabled
- Open access: articles available free online
- Global attainment for your research

Submit your manuscript at:

<https://scientiaricerca.com/submit-manuscript.php>