



## SOS FOR THE SAINTS

### Research and Conservation of the Remaining Wooden Artefacts from the Chapel of St James, Očura

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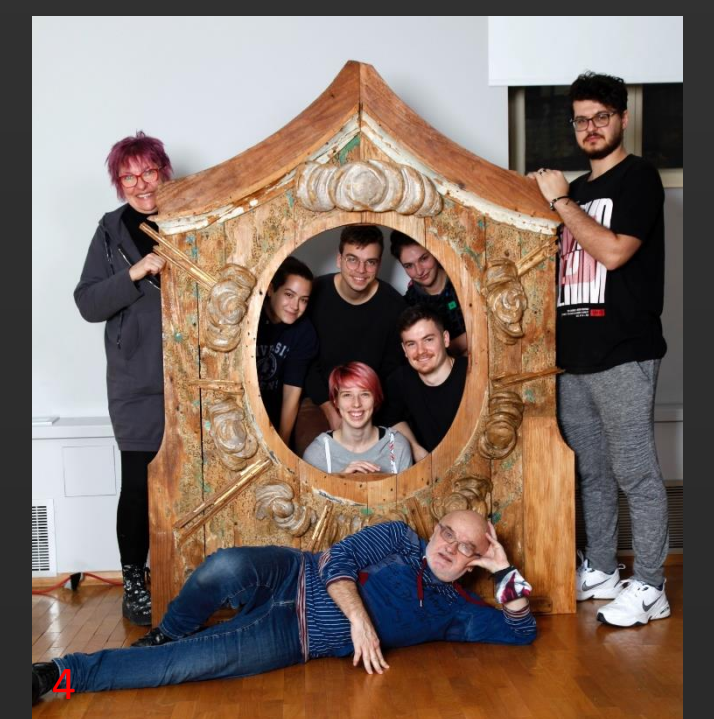
The protection of cultural heritage is a cornerstone of preserving the identity and continuity of a community. Successful conservation and restoration require not only expert knowledge and understanding of artworks, but also an analysis of the broader context of their creation, existence, and meaning. The *SOS for the Saints* project brings together all aspects of this complex issue, integrating research, conservation-restoration interventions, and considerations of presentation with the education of new generations of conservator-restorers.



#### Project Description:

The Chapel of St James in Očura is the largest Gothic chapel in the Hrvatsko Zagorje region. It was remodelled in the Baroque style in the 18th century, but following severe roof damage sustained during the final stages of the Second World War, the chapel's furnishings were left exposed to the elements and to drastic fluctuations in microclimatic conditions. Over the years, the artefacts were repeatedly relocated, stored at various sites—often inadequately packed—and subjected to a range of biological contaminants. All of this led to extensive degradation across all stratigraphic layers. Many sculptures have lost essential formal elements, and only minimal traces of original polychromy, gilding, and silvering remain.

Research and conservation-restoration work on the surviving wooden artefacts began in 2010, in collaboration with the Department of Conservation and Restoration of Artworks at the Academy of Fine Arts, University of Zagreb, as part of the Ministry of Culture and Media of the Republic of Croatia's national programme for the protection and preservation of movable cultural heritage. Over the years, through teaching, *in situ* student practice, and diploma theses, approximately fifteen Baroque sculptures and several fragments of altar architecture have been rescued, identified, interpreted, documented, and conserved. Although archival, iconographic, and art-historical research is ongoing, the available data is still insufficient for substantial reconstruction of sculptural form, polychromy, or gilding. The primary goal remains to conserve the sculptures, ensuring their structural integrity and visual legibility. It is crucial to reunite all preserved elements, treat them as a coherent ensemble, and—through inter-institutional cooperation and an interdisciplinary approach—devise the most appropriate strategy for their reintegration and presentation within the chapel's original liturgical context. As part of two diploma projects, a replica of the central Gothic Madonna sculpture was produced; the original is held in the Museum of Arts and Crafts in Zagreb.



#### Results and Challenges:

In 2022, the project was presented at a scientific conference and accompanying exhibition held *in situ*, within the unfinished chapel interior. This occasion further raised key questions and brought to light the complex challenges faced by the profession: How do we present sculptures that were once part of a richly ornamented liturgical ensemble? How do we convey their meaning in a space that, like the sculptures themselves, has lost its wholeness yet still remains in active use? The project and exhibition were awarded the Annual Award for the Protection of Cultural Heritage by the Croatian Society of Art Historians. Recognition and commendation from the professional community affirm the success and significance of this project, alongside the clear message that cultural heritage preservation and protection – as well as the development of the profession through active student involvement – must remain central to our professional and social responsibility.

#### Conclusion and Future Plans:

The *SOS for the Saints* project continues through ongoing research and conservation-restoration procedures. Future plans include broadening interdisciplinary cooperation, developing guidelines for possible future restoration work, and planning the presentation of the restored inventory to preserve the integrity of the interior and allow its continued function in contemporary contexts.

Only through quality education, the establishment of a strong interdisciplinary network of experts, and effective collaboration with the local community can we ensure the preservation, revitalisation, and long-term valuation of heritage sites such as the Chapel of St James in Očura.



#### Captions:

1. Očura, Chapel of St James, exterior: view from the southeast, photo by N. Vranić, 1959, MKM – FKB, inv. no. 21811, neg. no. I-E-183
2. Očura, Chapel of St James, exterior: view from the southeast, photo by A. Božičević, 2023
3. Reproduction of the central Gothic sculpture of the Virgin and Child, diploma student Luka Krešimir Stipić, photo by A. Božičević, 2021
4. Z. Jembrih, M. Krištofić, and students during the photography session of the sculptures for the exhibition, 2022
5. Chapel of St James – general view from the nave toward the sanctuary. In September 1947, the soaked sanctuary vault collapsed. Condition in 1947, MKM – FKB, inv. no. 6477, neg. no. III-530
6. Chapel of St James, Holy Mass, OKIRU archives
7. Exhibition preparations, Z. Jembrih and S. Bachrach Krištofić, 2022
8. *SOS for the Saints* exhibition: Research and Conservation-Restoration Work on the Remaining Wooden Artefacts from the Chapel of St James in Očura, photo by A. Božičević, 2022
9. Thanksgiving Mass at the Chapel of St James, photo by J. Kokeza, 1 Nov 2022
10. Project leader Z. Jembrih with collaborators at the presentation of the Annual Award for the Protection of Cultural Heritage by the Croatian Society of Art Historians
11. Opening of the *SOS for the Saints* exhibition: Research and Conservation-Restoration Work on the Remaining Wooden Artefacts from the Chapel of St James in Očura, photo by A. Božičević, 20 Oct 2022

**Project leader:** Zvezdana Jembrih, Academy of Fine Arts, University of Zagreb

**Collaborators:** Ana Božičević, Academy of Fine Arts, University of Zagreb; Danko Šourek, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Zagreb; Ivana Hazulin, Radboa Museum; Sanja Bachrach Krištofić