



**"THE CROWN" –**  
**MILOSLAV JOVANOVIĆ**  
In 'The Crown', the woman is holding the crown (flowers) which may be seen to represent her wish to touch a better life, a higher standard. The cow in the corner of the painting is the symbol of her home village.





# SOPHISTICATED NAIVE

by Elana Steinberg

*Painters of the naive style take the history and lore of the peasant village and landscape to create art of purity and a sophisticated innocence.*

**A**mongst the dictionary definitions of the word 'naive', Oxford could perhaps be taken mightily to task for its use of 'artless' as a fitting synonym. These two seemingly incompatible terms achieve a remarkably successful marriage actually, in a unique school of art that began in the fields and meeting places of peasant villages and has wound its way across the globe to include all manner of culture and practitioner, in a discipline that is bounded only by the artists' personal interpretation of their everyday domestic and spiritual lives. Naive art is entirely based on response rather than formula — the constraints of which are fact, happily uncharted waters for the purist naive painter.

Described variously by observers as 'primitive', 'folk' or 'peasant' art, Naive artists are all bound by a common creed — to depict personal vision and individual experience above and beyond formalised technique. Whilst lesser known Naive artists include Serbian masters such as Janko Brasic, Sava Sekulic and Milan Rasic, names associated with contemporary mythology are also prime protagon-

ists of the naive artform. Grandma Moses, arguably the most famous of naive artists, first put brush to canvas in the naive style towards the end of her very long life. Before her death at aged ninety-six, she managed to convince a collector to part with \$50,000 for one of her paintings. French painter, Henri Rousseau was credited with first bringing the naive style to mainstream attention, and he was supported in his efforts by affirmed cubist, Pablo Picasso who was also an ardent private collector of Serbian naive art.

Picasso was not alone amongst his prominent brethren in actively encouraging the naive style; French artists Jean Dubuffet and Paul Gauguin, British painter T.S. Lowry, critics Anatole Jakovsky and Andre Breton amongst many others, were all unlikely champions of this 'unsophisticated' artform. But perhaps the most inspired and inspiring was the magical Marc Chagall whose status as a naive painter is often called into question, but whatever his classification, the simple serenity of his angels and the brightly coloured stylised approach are all trademarks of a gifted 'naivety'.

Within the generic term 'naive art',





**'FIERCE' - TONY CONVEY**  
 "'Fierce' and 'Beastie Boy' show another side of my fascination with animals. These are imaginary creatures which probably have their origin deep in the dreams of childhood."

**'GRAND FINAL' - TONY CONVEY**  
 "'Grand Final' is of course self-explanatory. I was born in Melbourne and VFL football was a strong influence in my early, formative years."

there are countless schools and stylistic approaches, largely due to the fact that works are autobiographical in perception and interpretation.

"Naive artists have no formal training; they taught themselves between themselves and they teach each other. They don't talk about specialised art techniques like mixing the paints, the colours, preparing the canvasses, they talk about philosophy, about life. These were people who worked on the land; they were taught by nature and what was accumulating inside them was the urge, the sense of needing to say something and to start painting," explains Vasa Carapic, curator of the recent Serbian Naive Art Exhibition with Australian Guest Artists. An element of the Serbian cultural festival Vukovi Dani, held annually, Carapic included the Naive Artist exhibition this year to excite in this country what has been a rapidly increasing awareness and response internationally to naive art.

"The reason we decided to stage an exhibition of naive art this year is because across the world, naive art is very much appreciated and pursued. There are literally hundreds and thousands of people who follow naive art and it looks to be one of the strongest artforms in the world today. It is the only art that cuts through borders — it is internationally recognised immediately. That is why we decided to bring it here following the runs in Paris and Germany and prior to New York."

The Vukovi Dani exhibition displays basically the work of Serbian naive artists — one of the three most prolific and widely recognised schools in the world, accompanying the Balinese and Haitian. Given the age and richness of these cultures, naive art has obviously spanned generations as a folkloric portrayal of village life and activity, but it was only

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with the interest of the art world in the 1920's - 30's that it was adopted as an artistic *cause celebre* as Vasa explains. There are still however, cultures creating naive art that are under-represented, and Australian collectors need look only as far as the Australian outback to find one of the most exciting. "Historically speaking, Rousseau introduced the style to the world at large, then in the 1930's, the number of naive artists all over the world just emerged like mushrooms! Observers of the movement classify the artists in two groups — the people who were painting in the naive style before it became a world wide movement; the 'amateurs', and then there are those known as the 'professionals' who promoted their style as naive when it became a popular artform.

"Many observers today say that this first form is the purist one, the innocent one. But there are those who say that today's naive art is better because it is contemporary, a truer, more relevant interpretation of today. To classify Aboriginal art as naive art is an absolute truth! It is my personal belief that once Aboriginal art is widely discovered inter-

nationally, it will be a truly great representation of the naive style. As yet, it is unfortunately not greatly appreciated in this way."

Of the many talented and widely collected Serbian naive painters, the founding father of Serbian naive art remains the most celebrated. Janko Brasic, now a lively eighty-eight year old, has been depicting the events, rituals, people and countryside in a pictorial history of his home town, Oparic for nearly sixty years. When asked recently what painting meant to him, his response was simple but universally definitive. "What's it mean?" he echoed, "Well, life. Everything, I simply have to paint. It's my life."

Janko's paintings draw on a wealth of experience, on both local and national levels, even though he has never lived outside his small village. Instead, he brought the turbulent war years with Turkey, the joy of village fairs and weddings, the sadness of an elder's funeral and even the village drunk to countless exhibitions from Glasgow to Tokyo, and in return they came to him. He is the founder of the famous Oparic school where students wishing to develop the quintessential naive style come to learn his art.

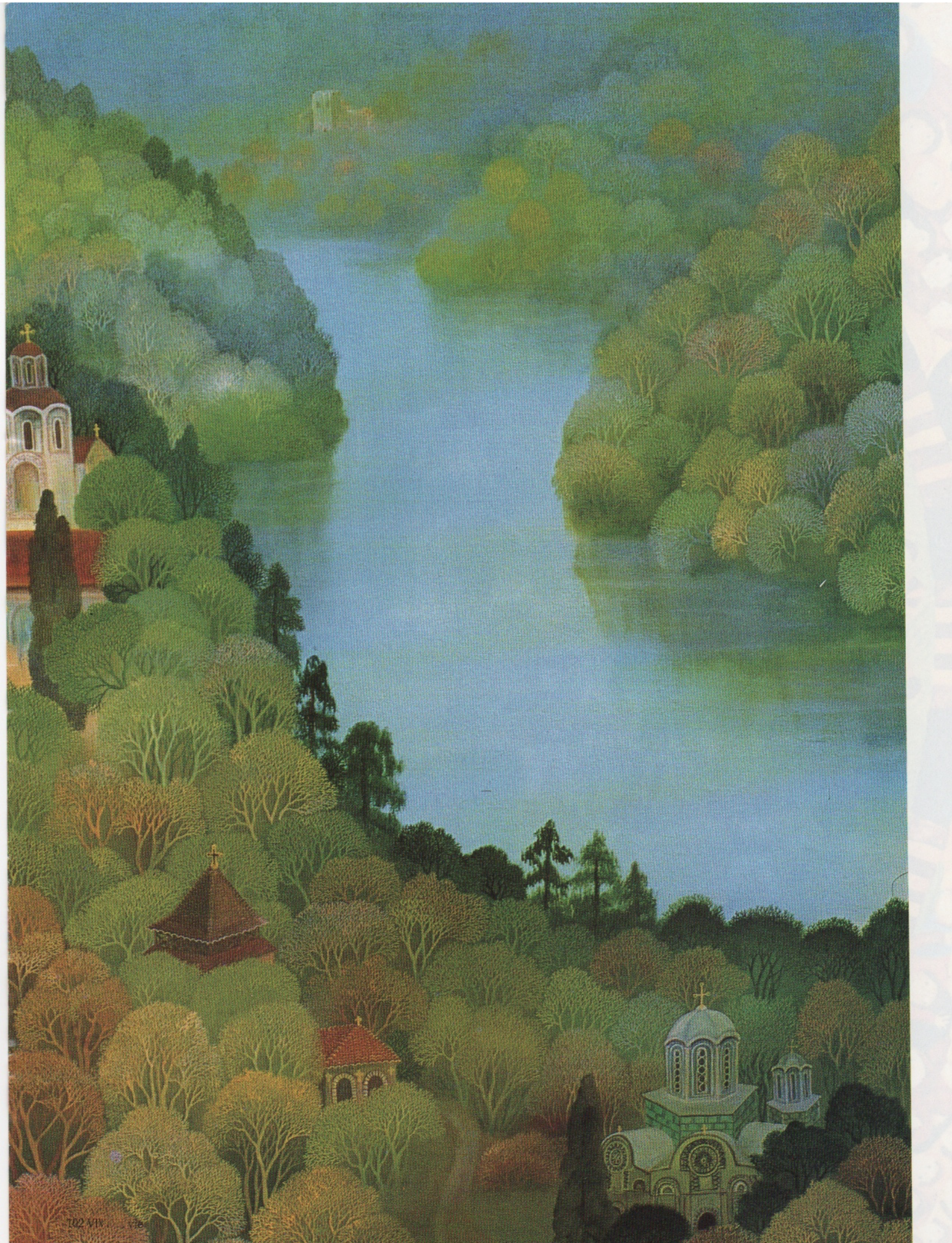
The lack of formalised technique extends even to a minimal understanding of basic technical skills. Without knowing how to prepare a canvas or mix correct ratios of colour, the overriding need to paint in the original naives compensated for the lack of art-teachers in the fields of Serbian villages or the mountains of the Balinese highlands.

"The Serbian artists that we exhibited here for example, had an enormous urge to paint but they had nowhere to turn in terms of learning skills," says Vasa. "Many of them began to paint without











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'GIANT WATERLILY'  
- MILAN TODD

preparing the canvas: they just took a piece of canvas, stretched it and started to paint. There were no pre-sketches or guidelines. None of them really had any form of technique, training or background. It was simply their expression of life."

As with many naive artists, Janko Brasic's first paintings were chalk drawings on the schoolroom blackboard. Canberra-based naive artists, Tony Convey, one of the chosen Australian guest artists in the exhibition recalls doing his first drawings as a child in his village, in this case the back-streets of Prahran in Melbourne's inner city.

"The first image that I can remember creating was the outline of a cat drawn with chalk on the footpath outside our home in Prahran," wrote Convey in the introduction to his 1986 exhibition at Melbourne's Gallery Art Naive. "I was between three and four years old... Much later when I began painting, my first pictures were again of animals. These attempts to capture the radiant beauty and energy of living creatures have been a recurring theme in my paintings."

The result is that much naive art is childlike in depiction of form and subject. This translates not as juvenalia, but as a refreshing simplicity that mirrors the impressionists in intention. Although renowned for their bright colours and scenes rich with vibrancy and myriad activity, there is nothing meretricious, flamboyant or outwardly commercial about naive art.

"The amazing thing about naive art is the people," says Vasa. "Apart from the picture being so beautiful, the people behind it tell of their story, their lives, the way they see it and the way they wanted to paint it. They have so many things to say; they put so much into one painting that any other artist in the world, looking from a commercial standpoint, could probably make twenty paintings from their one."

"One of these paintings, 'Looking at Horses' is an example of this. It is a village scene with hundreds of the villagers dancing and jumping about, and a row of them with their children are lined up in a field simply looking at horses. There is so much activity and so many subjects.

Jevtovic says that when he begins painting, he only aims to place one or two people in the picture but as the painting progresses, he become so excited about what he is doing the he just wants to put as many subjects in as he can! He can't even count them."

Amongst the artists exhibited were the Australians Tony Convey, Dorothy Gray and Serbian born Rale Djedovich and Milan Todd, a former pupil of Marc Chagall at the Ecole Des Beaux Arts in Paris. The local contingent have brought new elements to the sphere of the naive in contributions of both an individual style and an indigenous flavour. According to Vasa a naive artist will every so often step beyond the 'normal' parameters of naive art and embrace a variety of styles incorporating them in the naive. One such example was the unusual work of Sava Sekulic, a Serbian painter dubbed the 'Picasso of Naive Art' for his interesting interpretation of cubism.

"I suppose that you would call Sekulic's work 'Naive Cubism,'" says Vasa. "Although he kept the basics of naive, his work linked naive painting with a new configuration of contemporary art. Sekulic died this year at the age of eighty-seven, and the strange thing about his career is that when he began to paint at age fifty-five, no-one liked his work. He was painting for years and years and no-one would buy his art or exhibit him until one day, an interested buyer offered to exhibit his life's work and he suddenly became one of Serbian naive art's most popular painters, holding exhibitions all over the world."

Of the many passionate acquirers of naive art all over the world, Australian collectors number substantially. Ironically, devoid of the commercial sort of esotericism that has been so appealing to the collectors, naive art is one of the most collectable artforms in the post-modern world today. It's wide appeal is witnessed in the eclectic range of buyers including: entertainer Barry Humphries, Governor-General Bill Hayden, Robert Holmes a Court and an impressive array of doctors, lawyers and artists. It is art that is "easy to relate to" says Vasa; art that crosses borders, unaffected, innocent, naive but certainly not artless.



'OBSERVING HORSES' -  
DUSAN JEFTOVIC

Dusan Jevtovic was born in 1925 and worked as a blacksmith until World War II after which he became a policeman. He is fascinated by people and about 'Observing Horses' said, "I love people and when I start painting them I intend to paint only a few, but I get lost and when I have finished, I can't even count how many I have painted". In this painting, Dusan represents people looking at the horses, but in his characteristic style, they are all moving, dancing, jumping and celebrating.









'LANDING' - MILAN TODD

Pelicans with wildflowers. In his own words, "The birds are the only real elements in this painting. Everything else is imagined."

### CHAGALL'S CHARGE

Milan Todd was born in Yugoslavia but has lived and painted in Australia since the early fifties. A popular naive artist, Todd has used several artistic mediums to express his philosophy including wood carvings, before he found satisfaction in the naive style learned in the first instance from Marc Chagall at the Ecole Des Beaux Arts following World War II. Today his paintings, filled with colour-laden images of birds and landscape, figure in private collections all over the world from Australia's Lady MacMahon to the boardrooms of American corporate giants. An individual artist who defines his personal style as 'exotic naive', one of Todd's greatest inspirations remains to this day, the time spent and method learned with the great Chagall:

*"Even as a small child in Belgrade, Yugoslavia, I was always interested in art. I spent the war years as a soldier in the American/Allied forces before returning to Yugoslavia but before returning home I studied in France under Marc Chagall for four years. When the universities re-opened in 1945, there was a certain quota of vacancies left for the allied forces in which I was a soldier. By chance, I decided to apply and I was fortunate enough to get a place. I enrolled in the Ecole Des Beaux Arts fine arts faculty at the Sorbonne. I never dreamed that Chagall would be my teacher.*

*"I was free to study six days a week*

*and on Sunday I would fulfill my duties as a military policeman on patrol. The day he walked in to the studio, before he even introduced himself as Chagall, I thought that he was familiar. When he told us his name, I couldn't believe it! I thought it was a dream! He was such a beautiful man to work with — he guided me through art. Chagall was a naive — floating angels, floating forests . . . he used to tell us about his life in Russia before he emigrated to France. Even today, there are approximately 200 Chagall paintings stored in cellars somewhere in Russia from the time that he was denounced by the government. Perhaps now with Perestroika, they will release them.*

*"The way that Chagall expressed himself in painting was something special. Traditional Impressionism was popular at the time but Chagall was totally different to anything that you had seen before and that is really what influenced me to continue in the naive style. I recall doing a wood carving and subconsciously, I was copying him. My carving depicted bumblebee angels without legs, just wings and I realised that I was imitating Marc Chagall. As a result, I hated cubism. It forced you to do something that you didn't feel. Chagall never tried to force you: he wanted you to do what you felt comfortable with. He emphasised colour and personal perspective. There were no paints then like*

*they are today in tubes, ready mixed. We had a marble slab and we used to grind the colours on that for one hour at a time. He would tell us, 'Whatever you do, do well.' He was a wonderful man; although he was an older man, he was very young at heart, he talked to us at our level. He would tell us about life in Russia after the Bolshevik Revolution and show us his village paintings.*

*"When I came to be writing exam papers for second and third year art students in Australia, I wrote as a question, 'Everyone is copying someone else. Who are you copying?' I received the most fantastic answers — they never realised that they were imitative. I was and so were they . . .*

*"My style now is what I call, 'exotic naive'. The colours are very strong, very seldom will you see a pastel shade in one of my paintings and that is what I learned from Chagall — he always said, 'pure colours'. If you mix your paints with white, you will have vivid colours, if you mix them with black, you become a dull painter . . . Chagall died at the age of ninety-eight and he was painting right up until the end — at ninety, he painted the stained glass windows at the University of Jerusalem. I never saw him again after I left Paris, but each year on his birthday, I always sent him a card . . ."*

