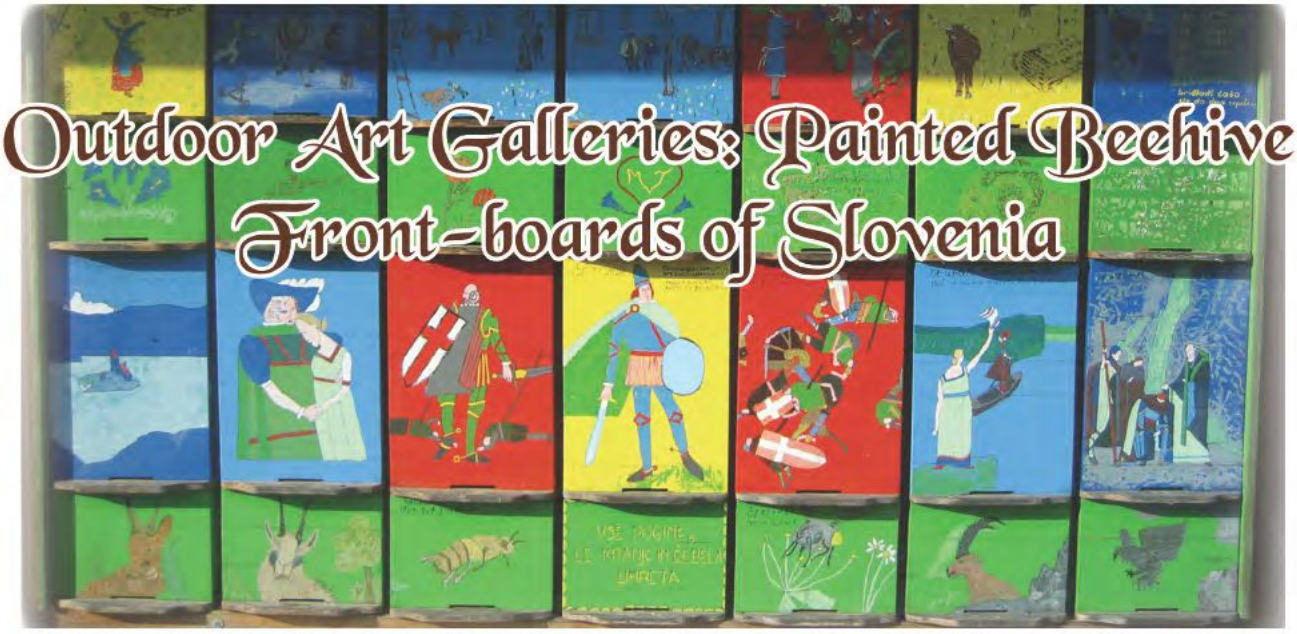
# Outdoor Art Galleries: Painted Beehive Front-boards of Slovenia



**A modern Slovenian bee house. While not painted in the traditional style, these front boards were painted by the beekeeper himself and give his house a very personalized touch.**

by WILLIAM BLOMSTEDT

When driving through the Slovenian countryside on a sunny April day, one can not but feel good about the world. After a long, wintery slumber, when days like this were just a dream pulling us through the rutted ice and snow, all forms of life now have their sun-streamed reward. The leaves have clothed the trees, the grass is reaching for the sky and clouds of flowery perfume periodically flood the car. This is the day when the waiting, rested honey bees spring into high gear. After being clustered in a tiny ball for many claustrophobic months, the bees burst out of the hive, zip around in a wing-stretching spiral and then head out to see what's blooming for dinner. After finding the source and clambering about the petals and stamen, the honey bees turn home with heavy stomachs and bright balls of pollen on their legs. In


**Above: (l) A beehive front honoring Anton Jaša, Slovenia's most celebrated beekeeper. (center) A battle scene, with the Slovenians driving away this batch of invaders (r) St. Peter, the leading disciple among Christ's followers; his symbol is a pair of keys.**

**Below: (l) A 3D version of Mary and Child. (center) The beekeeper and his family watching their hard little workers. What could be more pleasant? (r) Chasing off those pesky bears, a common complaint for Slovenian beekeepers.**

**A creepy fairy-tale scene where a witch hides some treasure in a barrel, which was later stolen.**

Slovenia, most beehives are stacked together in a hut, like a honey bee condominium, and when the bees return home they buzz through the clouds of their busy neighbors, deftly avoiding midair collisions before they settle down on their own entrance. With up to 60 other hives in that one hut, how did that bee know which hive was hers? If she looked up at her front-board, there is a strange pattern of colors and shapes, not like a flower at all. This bee might not be able to describe or understand what she sees, but to our human eyes it's a serene painting of a beekeeper sitting in the shade, smoking a long pipe and watching his bees fly in and out of the apiary.

A more pleasant scene I can't imagine, and perhaps this ethos is what started the unique Slovenian tradition of painting images on the fronts of their hives. In Slovenia, beekeeping holds an interesting and important branch of their culture, the relationship between human and bee developed with their traditional, agricultural lifestyle. The two species have a long history together in this part of the world; lore says that apiculture was 'quite developed' already in the 13th century and the technique and tradition of Slovenian beekeeping has been passed down from generation to generation. Starting sometime in the 18th century, a curious practice started here, one of painting the fronts of the bee-

**I am not sure if this is a face of an important saint, but his uncertain expression says it all. If you had bees flying in and out of your mouth, wouldn't you feel the same? And on a hot day, he could have one serious bee beard.**

hives, with each hive in the yard getting a different design. Like folk songs or myths, the artistic output of a culture is expressed through specific mediums of the region. The front panels of beehives became a showcase for the common people: an outlet for the small Slovenian farmers to express their thoughts, feelings, desires and sorrows.

The first evidence of a painted front board is from the year 1758, over 250 years ago. It is a simple picture of the Madonna and Child, with the figures seated directly above the entrance to the hive so the bees would flow in and out beneath their feet. Other front-boards from that time are undated or have been destroyed and their history remains ambiguous until the early 1800s, when the 'golden age' of front-boards began. Oddly enough, these front-boards were so ubiquitous and present that Slovenian cultural researchers did not pay any notice to them until a collection appeared in the early 20th century, and only then were these realized as unique art forms. The lack of documentation and notable artists has allowed the beginnings of this art to remain mysterious; it is not known where the front-boards originated from, where they were most prolific or even why this practice started.

What is known is that the classic period for painted front-boards was between 1820 and 1890. It is believed that that they were decorated so that the bees would recognize their own home, as well as allowing the beekeeper to easily distinguish between beehives in his apiary. Also, it is thought that the decoration acted as a protective element for the hive, as many of the early paintings had apotropaic signs like crosses, trotamoras, and depictions of Christ and Mary. From these guardian figures, the paintings evolved onto saints and idols that offered protection in different realms, and eventually spread into a variety of topics that were important to a rural life.

The front-boards, which measure from 8 to 12 inches wide and 4 to 8 inches tall, were often made out of spruce, but other woods like linden, pine or larch were sometimes used. The paints were made traditionally by grinding basic natural pigments with linseed oil, giving the paint durability to withstand all types of weather. The contours of the figures would be drawn in charcoal for added resilience, so that even when the base colors faded, the relief would still be visible.

The painters of these panels ranged from traveling professionals to local artisans to amateur beekeepers, and the quality similarly varied. Some were highly intricate, almost realistic paintings while others were merely cartoonish depictions. The high quality pieces are quite rare, with the more common being the panels showing simple, narrative artwork. It is likely that these professional painters, who were schooled in the late Baroque style and normally painted for churches or other bourgeoisie clients, turned to this 'low art' during lulls

**A common Slovenian village scene: a church on a hill, red roofs and plenty of forest.**

in work or in times of material need. Themes and motifs were established and the popular paintings were reproduced and sold throughout the country.

An art historian might question if these painted front boards are considered art, due to their repetition and near mass-production, but to me they are simple pieces of beauty and care. A more apt characterization would be 'folk art,' for these front boards were painted more often with content in mind, rather than aesthetics. The drawing is clear and pronounced with the main focus of the painting outlined in a black contour. The backgrounds are often a singular, simple color; usually an off-white, yellow, blue or pink. There is no spatial depth to the figures: the scene occurs on one plane. The faces of the characters are usually unemotional and the 'mood' or feeling is conveyed only through their gestures. A Slovenian comic magazine, Stripburger, compared the painted hives to modern day comics, drawing similarities in the use of motifs and simplified production. Both styles have a capability of telling a story with very limited means.

What make these painted front boards special are their humorous and often poignant content with scenes that depict life and thought on a rural Slovenian farm in the 1800s. The early examples of front boards often had a religious theme, depicting scenes from the Old and New Testaments, Jesus, Mary of the Pilgrimage and various saints. But as time passed, the subjects moved away from religion and the secular paintings become far more interest-

**Elijah is taken up into Heaven. He is said to have been carried off to heaven in a chariot of fire.**


**St. Florian, often pouring water over a burning house, is a common saint to grace the front of the beehive. He is the Saint of firefighters, chimney sweeps and soap boilers.**

ing, throwing light onto a specific type of people in a certain time period. After religion, the artists branched out into war scenes, portraying conflicts both close to home (against the Turks, the Italians, or Napoleon) and battles that happened far away (against Albanians and Arabs.) These pictures were no longer solely talismans to protect the bees; they morphed into depictions of important events as a sort of historical record.

From there the paintings became a form of creative expression. The artists, or those who bought the paintings, were communicating their own worries, thoughts, ideas, sorrows, joys or humor. Many of these paintings tell a story, or at least try to communicate a message. Looked at as a whole, these stories document the ideas and feelings of the farming class from that time period. Paintings and sculptures we see today in prestigious galleries, or 'High Art', is often far removed from the normal, working person and their troubles. The same goes with much of what is considered art today – it interests only a certain sect of people. These beehive panels are a form of art that is able to document and give us a view of what the farmer or lower classes thought of the world around them.

One vein of this is the many front-board paintings that critique the upper class society, high taxes and military conscription.

**Tailors were often chided for being so slow. In this scene a giant snail was fast enough to tree this tailor, while the other two men do who-knows-what.**

On one there is a scene showing a Slovene farmer rocking a Frenchman in a cradle (from the Napoleonic era, when the French were taxing the Slovenians), or of an office man pocketing money, or of a scene of two farmers, each pulling on one end of a cow while a third man (the lawyer) is calmly milking the beast. Lawyers are not well looked upon in these paintings and neither were other 'city' professions, especially tailors. In those days a tailor's work was considered feminine and inferior and there are many strange front boards depicting tailors being chased and overrun by giant snails, a strong comment on the speed of their work. Other objects of ridicule were gamblers, fornicators, clumsy people and slackers.

Exploiting the weaknesses of women was also a popular topic. A popular front board, one I see in replicas and on postcards, is 'The Woman's Mill.' It shows a man bringing an old lady to a mill run by a demon, where one old woman is put through the machine and out on the other side appears a beautiful young maiden. Or another of a man sitting on the side of a river, his trousers attached to a stick held out over the water where three women are fighting to be the washer. There is a certain directness and sarcasm in the scenes with women as the main characters and my guess is that it was mainly men who painted the front-boards and we are unable to get the women's side of the story. As for the misogynic humor, I imagine men joking around together are probably the same back then as they are today.

These 'classic' paintings, as shown in these pictures, are not often seen on bee houses today. While I was in Slovenia, the bee hives were usually painted with different, bright colors, attracting the bees back to their home with hue rather than picture. Today the traditional painted front boards exist as inexpensive replicas in souvenir shops, or, if you wanted to pay a pretty penny, then you might be able to find an original in an antique store or at the Sunday morning flea market in Ljubljana. Two large collections of front boards exist for the public eye: one in the Ethnographic museum in Ljubljana and the other at the Apicultural Museum in Radovljica, a half-hour's drive outside of the capital city. The Apicultural museum has nearly 300 original front boards on display, that is, when they aren't on a tour somewhere around the world. In 2007 they were put on display in the center of Paris, impressing Parisians and tourists alike. If we are lucky, perhaps one day they will make it over to America for an exhibit.

While the classic style might not be seen in use today, every now and then I see hand painted bee fronts with a personalized touch. Some beekeepers are willing to sacrifice their time to decorate their hives. There is still a commitment to maintaining that tradition, whether it is for their pleasure, or for the bees. I wonder, if taken in the same vein as the old painted front-

**The funeral of the hunter was a common theme, where roles were reversed. He is always carried by animals and only his dog is sad.**

boards, what themes would welcome the bees to their hive today? If depicting their troubles, we might find large paintings of varroa mites on the front, or of the melting larvae of foulbrood. Perhaps a scene with crops being sprayed with chemicals? Or a shady scene of a boat unloading barrels of imported 'honey'? In America I would expect a painting or two showing a gas station with the diesel and gas prices rapidly ascending and a frowning beekeeper filling up the truck.

The painted front boards are unique to Slovenia and offer a special insight into the life of a 19th century farmer, as well as what this country thinks about bees. This small act of decoration speaks volumes when it comes to caring not only about the bees, but about the ecosystem and the environment that they live in. It harkens back to the days when one lived off of the land, when one didn't feel so big and powerful in the face of elements and needed every measure of good will and hope to get through another winter.

**Acknowledgments**

Many thanks to Verena Vidic and Ida Gnilšak of the *Čebelarski Muzej* in Radovljica.

**Here are two scenes describing relationships between men and women. The first shows two men getting tugged home from a game of cards, while the bachelor takes in the winnings. Below, a scene showing the women doing all the work, while carrying the men along with them.**