

Jelka Radauš Ribarić and the Ethnographic Museum in Zagreb

Jelka Radauš Ribarić, distinguished ethnologist and long-standing associate of the Ethnographic Museum in Zagreb, died in Zagreb on 9 March 2015, only a day after her 93rd birthday. With this text I would like to remind and inform our readers about some details from her life and work.

Jelka Radauš Ribarić was born in Maribor (Slovenia) on 8 March 1922. Her father Josip, from Istria, was a linguist, Slavist and collector of folk songs, her mother Zora a special education teacher. She attended primary school in Maribor and Kastav, followed by secondary school in Kastav and the Girls' High School in Sušak. She graduated from the Second High School in Zagreb in 1940. She enrolled in the 27th Department of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, where she studied ethnology (major), southern Slav literature, Croatian and archaeology. She graduated in 1944. Her first employment, as a trainee librarian, was at the National and University Library in Zagreb 1945. Only a few months later, on 1 August 1945, she got a job at the Ethnographic Museum in Zagreb, where she remained – as curator, senior curator and director – until her retirement on 31 December 1975.

She spent a lot of time in the field, engaged in the systematic research of Croatian traditional culture and art. In addition to Istria, the scope of her research work included other parts of the Dinaric, Pannonian and Adriatic ethnographic zones, and ethnographic study of the Croats abroad (Burgenland/Gradišće in Austria and the Mohács region in Hungary). She studied ethnological phenomena with an interdisciplinary approach, searching for their roots or seeking comparisons with other cultural- historical and artistic periods. Although her interest focused on traditional apparel and textile products, in her writings she discussed a variety of ethnological themes important for the evaluation of the Croatian cultural heritage.

Concurrently she cooperated actively with many cultural organisations and societies. Let us just mention her involvement in the Professional Board of the International Folklore Festival in Zagreb (from 1966), and her merits with regard to the foundation and the long-standing Vinkovačke jeseni (Vinkovci autumn festival of traditional Croatian folklore). In her life and professional activity she drew great support and cooperation from her husband, the late sculptor Vanja Radauš. After retirement she became the

professional adviser of the Institute of Ethnology and Folkloristics in Zagreb, member of the Croatian Mariological Society and the Society of Croatian University Women. In the latter she chaired from 1993 the programme *Traditional Textile Skills supporting the integration of exiled women* – returnees from Banovina, Slavonia and Baranja.

Her publications covering a variety of subjects also deserve due attention. The seventy-odd published titles reflect the broad range of professional and scientific themes covered by her ethnographic and historical research, including the particularly interesting theme of the clothing of statues representing Madonna and Child in Croatian sacral art. Out of a long list we shall only single out the titles of published books: “Vezak vezla (*Croatian Folk Embroidery*), 1973; “Narodne nošnje Hrvatske” (*National Costumes of Croatia*), 1975; and “Ženska narodna nošnja u Istri” (*Women’s National Costumes in Istria*), 1977. Unfortunately, the manuscript of the new enlarged edition of *National Costumes of Croatia* has not been published.

For her work she received a number of awards – letters of gratitude, honorary memberships, prizes and scrolls of honour – including the *Chakavian Assembly Medal* (1973) and the *Order of the Croatian Star with the Effigy of Marko Marulić* (1996). From 1993 she was a corresponding member of the Pontifical International Academy of Mary. She was also for many years a member of the Croatian Ethnological Society and the Croatian Museum Society. In 2006 Jelka Radauš Ribarić received the *Milan Gavazzi Life Achievement Award* of the Croatian Ethnological Society.

Jelka Radauš Ribarić¹ started working in the Ethnographic Museum in Zagreb in 1945 as a trainee curator. She was immediately involved in all museum activities, which had to be re-started after a period of inactivity during the Second World War. Very early on she set off on her first field assignment in Istria. Her first precious experience and her Istrian origin would strengthen her link with Istria for a long time. Her work, along with the acquisition of museum material, produced a number of professional papers and her Ph.D. thesis, *Women’s National Costume of Istria*, which she defended in 1965. The manuscript, enlarged with new research and perceptions, was not published before 1997. It is an extremely valuable contribution to Croatian ethnological scientific literature. In addition to Istria, the scope of her work included the Kvarner islands, the Dubrovnik littoral and Hrvatsko Zagorje; later on the list would be further enlarged with Lika and, especially, Slavonia and Baranja. As a young member of the museum staff she also participated in the preparation of Prof. Marijana Gušić’s themes in the first post-war display of the Museum. As a member of the team of the Central Museum Activities Department of the Ministry of Culture she was also involved in the work on the first displays of the museums in Dubrovnik and Zadar. In 1965, after twenty years of museum experience, Jelka Radauš Ribarić ran for the office of Director of the Ethnographic Museum. She would hold that office until retirement in 1975. As she took charge, she gained first hand knowledge of the unfavourable condition of the Museum

1 Parts of the text were taken over from the article *Prof. Marijana Gušić and Dr. Jelka Radauš Ribarić – Directors of the Ethnographic Museum in Zagreb*, published in the *Informatica museologica* journal, 3-2 (1-2), Museum Documentation Centre, Zagreb, 2001.

due to the poor condition of the building, limited space, and inadequate conditions for material storage and work of the Museum staff. Finding a more adequate museum facility has already been an issue for longer time, but the lack of funding precluded any plans. It was soon established that the only solution, albeit not an easily feasible one, was to be found in the adaptation of existing facilities in the old building of the Museum. On the basis of the preliminary design of architect Aleksandar Freudenreich, in 1968 the Zagreb City Assembly approved the initial funding for the adaptation of the Museum. Construction work took three years, and the new permanent display was realised in October 1972. From the very start of adaptation the personal dedication of Jelka Radauš Ribarić in her capacity of director and expert museum ethnologist was invaluable. In cooperation with the architect certain areas in the building were converted: the basement and the attic were adapted for storage requirements; sunken ceilings were installed in the exhibition rooms on the first floor; additional space was provided for the administrative and professional staff, and for the requirements of the preparation workshops. Along with construction work, due attention had to be paid to moving and safeguarding the Museum holdings. Most important of all, the new Museum display had to be planned and the material prepared for exhibition. In all these activities the director enjoyed the active cooperation and support of the staff, enhanced on the eve of the opening with the employment of several young experts – ethnologists and preparators. Therefore, the new display was the result of team efforts, but Jelka Radauš Ribarić provided the preliminary conception and managed its implementation. In that endeavour she could certainly draw on her excellent knowledge of the Croatian ethnographic material and, especially, of the Museum holdings at the time.

The holdings were divided into several sections: *Basic branches of economy and folk handicrafts* (nut and fruit gathering; land tilling; animal husbandry; bee-keeping; textile handicrafts; wickerwork; pottery), *National costumes in Croatia* (divided into regions in the Pannonian, Dinaric and Adriatic zones), and an exhibition of ethnographic material from the *Department of Extra-European Cultures*. Painter Edo Kovačević designed the display in cooperation and after consultation with the author; the assistance of sculptor Vanja Radauš was sought for the design of anthropological types of the museum mannequins. New showcases with large glass surfaces were used, freestanding or along the walls of the halls, and mounts and panels of varying dimensions. Every section included additional information in the form of drawings, photographs and legends, and due attention was paid to following the current state-of-the-art museological practice. The Art Nouveau architecture of the interior, especially of the entrance space and of the round hall beneath the museum dome, was respected for the first time in the layout of the objects.

The reopening of the Museum in 1972 was followed by more intensive organisation of occasional thematic exhibitions in the adapted second floor space. Jelka Radauš Ribarić was involved in the design of most of them. I shall just mention the exhibitions she authored: *Formed Wood* (1973), *Folk Life in Istria* (1975) and *Croatian Folk Embroidery* (1975, held in the Art Pavilion in Zagreb). Her name is also linked with two major exhibition projects: she co-authored the Yugoslav part of the exhibition *Forms of Folk Life in Europe* held in Belgium in 1975, and she was the conceptual author and

coordinator of the textile handicrafts exhibition *The Magic of the Thread*, held in Zagreb in 1988 during the 12th Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences.

The crown of the exhibition activity of Jelka Radauš Ribarić came in 2003. Already retired, she realised in the Museum the exhibition *Wedge-Shaped Clothes in Istria – Origin and Existence* which highlighted the professional and scientific knowledge on Istrian clothes and their comparison with similar clothing in Europe. In a way the theme was the guiding principle of her research, professional and scientific pursuits during her first days in the Museum, in her doctoral thesis and in her book on Istrian national costumes, all the way to the abovementioned exhibition which in a way integrated her activity linked with the Ethnographic Museum in Zagreb.

Today, in 2015, visitors of the Ethnographic Museum in Zagreb will see the old “new display of Jelka Radauš Ribarić” from 1972. But it will also soon become part of history. The current management and professional staff of the Museum are faced with the major task (resembling the one in 1968-1972) – the conception and implementation of the exhibitions of the new display, in line with new ethnological and museological perceptions, based on acquired museum material. I wish they will dedicate the same amount of knowledge, perseverance and courage in her work as Jelka Radauš Ribarić did with her associates in the nineteen-sixties.

What to say at the end? THANK YOU EVER SO MUCH, Jelka Radauš Ribarić! Thank you on behalf of all the Museum staff who created with you part of the history of the Ethnographic Museum in Zagreb, and especially on behalf of us, “the 1972 generation” (already retired), who got to know under your mentorship, and discovered the magic of ethnographic material and of the museum profession .

Along with our gratitude, it would be nice and indeed very useful to see the implementation of the idea, present for some time among ethnologists, to collect and publish all the writings of Jelka Radauš Ribarić, published so far in many national and foreign journals. Such collected papers would support a more detailed analysis and assessment of her contribution to ethnological science as a whole.

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