

## Danijela Križanec-Beganović. Feathers, Apples and a Grain of Salt - Christmas Ornaments from the Holdings of the Ethnographic Museum in Zagreb. Zagreb, The Ethnographic Museum, 28<sup>th</sup> November 2017 - 28<sup>th</sup> January 2018

### Exhibition Review

Christmas exhibition entitled "Feathers, Apples and a Grain of Salt - Christmas Ornaments from the Holdings of the Ethnographic Museum in Zagreb" was opened at the end of year 2017. The name itself spurred interest and curiosity among the general public, because salt and feathers, pink feathers as a matter of fact, depicted in posters called out to the general public to come and see the exhibition. These materials are not what one thinks of when they hear Christmas or are not generally associated with Christmas. However, both feathers and salt were used as materials for making Christmas decorations. The author of this exhibition, Danijela Križanec-Beganović, wanted to present these as an oddity among the materials we know are used for Christmas decorations.

In addition to these two specificities the exhibition presents a wide variety of Christmas decorations from the Collection of Objects Related to Customs and Beliefs at the Ethnographic Museum in Zagreb. This exhibition gives a comprehensive overview of all kinds of Christmas tree decorations and greenery in the house, and decorating the home at Christmas, both traditional and urban decorations are kept at the Ethnographic Museum. This exhibition gives insight into various materials, and decoration modelling typology. In this exhibition adornment is presented as a standalone topic connected with greenery in the house, a Christmas branch, decorations and Christmas tree. The festive atmosphere typical of the Advent and post-Advent periods is merely hinted at. The chosen exhibits illustrate holidays and festive events, for example, the Feast of St. Lucia is marked with a pumpkin, a tall mitre symbolizes Saint Nicholas' day. Christmas wheat, candles, Christmas log, the nativity scene symbolize Christmas, and "a star for three wise men" which marks Epiphany that belongs to Christmas holidays season are exhibited.

Approximately 500 objects are displayed. Most of the exhibits were obtained and collected in continental Croatia. They are divided into several smaller units based on two sections. The first section which dominates the space is made up of materials and typology of decoration, such as the determination of basic kinds of material: for example, decorating with edible materials - fruit and pasta; straw, wax, and paper are commonly used as decorating materials. The typology of decorations is also presented by giving an overview of multitude of shapes: nuts, apples, fruit, "Christmas" apples and similar ball shaped decorations made of nuts. Edible decorations are next, such as gingerbread cookies called licitars, chocolate candy, and other sweets. Paper decorations shaped like flowers - "roses", chains, and stars, are next. Textile and cotton decorations follow, as well as glass blown baubles which had to be researched by studying decorations crafters from Gornji Stenjevec. Wire decorations coated with crystalized salt are the

last. Salt is by analogy connected to the German tradition in Halle, a city in which a salt mine has been active since the Middle Ages.

Two large Christmas trees decorated in a traditional style, called *kinč*, are visually the most impressive elements of this exhibition. They are accompanied by documentary photos from the Institute of Ethnology and Folklore, and other decorated Christmas trees. The tree decorated with paper "roses", stars, apples and dried fruit stands out. Other decorations made of wheat, corn husks, paper and white and colored feathers called Christmas chandeliers can also be seen. Most of these decorations were home-made, although there are some which were bought in store. Visitors can also see two smaller artificial Christmas trees from Germany, made of colored feathers. These trees emphasise the theme and issues around environmental approach to Christmas tree decorations. This idea has long been present in Germany. The first artificial Christmas trees were made mid 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The other large section of this exhibition consists of Christmas tree decorations and its diversity within the context of traditions in Croatia. Objects from holdings of the Ethnographic Museum are used to present this section. The Christmas tree tradition is a tradition which comes from German aristocracy. It gradually came to all European Catholic courts. The court in Vienna adopted this tradition at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and from there it slowly spread all over the Monarchy. We now know that the earliest records of decorating a tree in Zagreb date back to 1856. Gift giving is also mentioned, but only in the sense of charitable donations to poor children. The Christmas tree tradition is probably older than that, at least in continental Croatia, it is in fact typical of the Biedermeier period.

This section also gives a chronological overview of the way various decorations developed and appeared. Of course, it starts with edible decoration and small candles illustrated with depictions of Germany. Autochthonous depictions of Croatia have never been found, however some information on confectioners and producers of honey does exist. They used to make Christmas decorations. According to available information, the Christmas tree tradition was brought to continental Croatia in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. The decorations were mostly handmade. From 1880s on factory made decorations started gaining popularity. There are numerous exhibits on display which help illustrate factory made and imported decorations. A variety of decorations made of cotton, wax and metal strings is typical of a German town Sebnitz where these decorations used to be made at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Candle holders and other decorations which used to be sold at bookshops and other stores also come from Germany and Austria. Most of the store - bought decorations were blown glass decorations. This section of the exhibition displays a wide variety of blown glass decorations. They are exhibited chronologically. Most of them is still of German origin, but some are from Czech Republic. Czech decorations dominated in Croatia in the period between the two world wars. A large Christmas tree decorated with white ornaments dominated this section of the exhibition: glass baubles, candy, cotton, garlands, were all used to recreate a "white Christmas tree" which was popular and inspired by fashion from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This tradition stuck around for decades.

Croatians started making Christmas decorations in the interwar period. The production began at the height of the luxurious art deco period and revived the inclination towards creating decorations inspired by traditional costumes. I am referring to decorations crafted by Željka Sertić and her pupils, and a line of decorations made in 1944, most of which are kept at the Ethnographic Museum. Ljerka Jovan Šarić, a ceramist, promoted the idea of decorating the Christmas tree with wooden ornaments inspired by gingerbread biscuits licitars shaped like horses, boots, cribs, clocks, which were all painted the same. She called this "licitar Christmas tree".

By presenting chronology through exhibits and the way the style and fashion changed in adorning the Christmas tree this exhibition points to a cultural perspective - this tradition was imported and has become a part of Croatian tradition. Pictorial representations used in this exhibition show how fashion and style changed. This is all documented in materials kept at the Ethnographic Museum. Dim but intense blue color dominated all spaces in which the exhibition was set up. It went well with discrete elements made of light wood and lit cabinets. The cabinets are divided into smaller sections to simulate boxes with 12 compartments in which baubles are sold. These could be seen in advertising catalogues at the turn of the century. Nikolina Jelavić Mitrović is the author of the visual identity. Viola Šebalj and Nikolina Jelavić Mitrović are the authors of the catalogue.

The exhibition is accompanied by a bilingual Croatian-English catalogue entitled "Christmas Ornaments from the Holdings of the Ethnographic Museum in Zagreb" which is comprised of two texts: "Feathers, Apples and a Grain of Salt - Christmas Ornaments from the Holdings of the Ethnographic Museum in Zagreb", by Danijela Križanec-Beganović, and "Christmas Tree in the Context of Urban Culture", by the author of this review, Arijana Koprčina. The catalogue was reviewed by Aleksandra Muraj and Vanja Brdar Mustapić.

Christmas exhibition "Christmas Ornaments from the Holdings of the Ethnographic Museum in Zagreb", by Danijela Križanec-Beganović was set up in Ethnographic museum. She gave a brilliant and comprehensive overview of Christmas tree adornment by displaying and interpreting objects from a large Collection of Objects Related to Customs and Beliefs. This material is unique, fragile and prone to deterioration, but it is the material which opens the door to a wide variety of ethnological, anthropological, historical, art, and cultural interpretations.

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