

Tamara Nikolić Đerić. Memories Embroidered in Bale / Ricordi ricamati a Valle. Rovinj, Multimedia Centre "Ulrika", 29th March - 22nd July 2018

Exhibition and Catalogue Review

The exhibition "Memories Embroidered in Bale" was launched at the request of the local community. Local people wanted to display their region's richness materialised through women handicraft and they wished to present intangible culture which reflects expertise, skills, local dialect, and memories of times long gone which is why they designed this exhibition in collaboration with ethnologists from the Ethnographic Museum of Istria / Museo etnografico dell'Istria.¹ The objective of the exhibition is to adopt a collaborative approach to local heritage.

Thus, EMI/MEI reaffirmed its expertise within Istria as well as its ongoing support of local communities and their valorisation and adequate presentation of their own local heritage.

Prior to the exhibition a two-year research was conducted and the inventarization of 184 objects owned by 20 families was undertaken. Documents which contain interviews, photos, objects dimensions, brief descriptions of objects, and entries on objects' owners are stored at EMI/MEI. This is an even more impressive enterprise if we take into consideration the fact that Bale Municipality does not own any cultural institutions which could permanently and systematically handle and keep tangible and intangible local heritage for future generations. Approximately 70 objects are exhibited, the rest can be seen on screen. In addition to photos of objects, photos of women whose handicrafts are exhibited can be seen. Collecting these items proved especially challenging due to the fact that the authors lived in the late 19th and the early 20th centuries and that the people who inherited these objects and who now own them emigrated to Italy after the Second World War and very rarely visit Bale. Furthermore, the objects were processed at the premises owned by the Italian Community of Bale - Valle. It is interesting that some of the authors' photos were replicated based on photos on their gravestones.

After processing objects and facts, Tamara Nikolić Đerić, the author of the exhibition, conceptualized the exhibition based on seasons, annual cycles and ritualization of common events, namely from birth to death whereby she paid special attention to important life events and "initiations" such as education, holy sacraments, and getting married. Practical objects made of fabric and ornamented with monochromatic embroidery in line with economic circumstances in the late 19th and the early 20th centuries are the backbone of this exhibition.

Given that themes are represented through women handicraft, i.e. towels for special events (when going to the doctor's, at "death bed", at birth), pillowcases and sheets

1 Continuing EMI/MEI.

/ bedding (a dowry), children's clothes, swaddling bands (*faše*), and crocheted caps, the exhibition also documents how these items were crafted and how they were used (for solemn events) and what their symbolic value was in contrast to regular menial life in Bale.

The exhibition was opened at the Multimedia Centre "Ulika" in Bale in collaboration with the Tourist Office in Bale and the Italian Community of Bale on the 29th March 2018. The catalogue was also presented there on the 2nd May 2018. Tamara Nikolić Derić is the author of the exhibition and the catalogue, and she is a curator at the Ethnographic Museum of Istria. Nikolina Rusac is an expert associate - documentarist.

The Multimedia Centre "Ulika" is located at the very centre of Bale and is open for all visitors and citizens. The exhibition is set up on the main floor for ease of access and visibility. Posters and roll-up banners placed at the entrance contribute to visibility. By the entrance, on the left hand side, a big screen is set up on which the authors of this exhibition wish visitors welcome. Woman's hand and mind are emphasized as the ones who crafted these items, and so is the fact that in many cases intangible heritage cannot be detached from tangible heritage. The exhibition flows from left to right and follows life cycle through accentuating "special" events. In the introduction the author presents women handicraft in Istria and puts special stress on fabric ornamentation with monochromatic embroidery. Women handicraft has so far been neglected in research so the author relied on works by Jelka Radauš Ribarić, Ph.D., for theoretical insights and comparison purposes. However, Radauš Ribarić did not focus as much on Italian cultural elements and costumes in this region.

The author also introduces us to the way women from Bale learned how to embroider, which I find extremely important considering that majority of this education was done outside the family. It was nuns who taught girls how to embroider. In addition to field work, household chores, studying and homework, girls had to learn how to embroider in order to be able to prepare their dowry (*dota*). Dowry preparation usually began at an early age. Wealthy families and brides from other regions commissioned their dowry (mostly bedding) from needlewomen in Bale or Rovinj.

A presentation of life cycle through women handicraft ensues. It all begins with birth and christening. Mothers who had the means prepared a decorative pillow, *cuscin de battesimo*, in which infant was carried. Caps and shirts for newborns were embroidered, as well as decorative linen for a wooden crib. A crib is exhibited which has been in a family from Bale for four generations - the owner slept in the crib, and so did his father, his son, and his grandson. The crib has matching linen and swaddling bands (*faše*) are attached to it. Across from the crib and the accompanying story printed on buckram, there is a large white horizontal cabinet in which children caps, shirts, and shoes are exhibited, as well as pillow cases. Namely, half of the cabinet draws on the flow of the exhibition narrative which documents the process of dowry preparation. A whole section is dedicated to a specific turning point in every girl's life - wedding. The central exhibit, a bedroom from the late 19th century fully furnished for the wedding night, is located within this section. In addition to a bed, night stands, and a mirror, a wardrobe can be seen in which nightgowns are displayed with the initials of women

who made them and the first owner's initials on them. Under the heading "Dowry and Wedding Preparation" everyday bedding is analysed, as well as solemn clothes for the wedding night and towels used at birth or during illness.

The room was lent to the Centre by the Rovinj Heritage Museum and it enriches the exhibition by creating an atmosphere of intimate space in which these objects were created and used in real life. As a central theme dowry takes up half of the right hand side wall. We can see the story on the uniqueness of crafting. We can read that one of the informants said in the 1950s that her family prepared her dowry when she was only 11 years old. Several more pillow cases are exhibited in the chest of drawers with a mirror. Pillow cases dominate the exhibition because every girl owned at least one set of pillowcases which she took to her new home.

In the section entitled "Loved Ones Send-Off" we learn that up until 1997 residents of Bale organised a wake in the home of the deceased to send their loved ones off. A towel was laid out on the table, and the deceased was put on the towel. Another towel was used to cover up the body. The third towel which was ornamented was put underneath the head of the deceased and it reached the floor. The local name for this towel literally translates as "the towel for the dead." This towel is very rare which is why there are no specimens at the Museum. In some communities these towels were buried with the deceased, but in Bale these towels were very valuable and were passed on through generations. Towels for the dead were nothing short of a status symbol. Informants explain this is so because neighbours would come to offer condolences and this was an opportunity to show "wealth," the skills of the woman of the house, and respect for the deceased. The towels are skillfully exhibited on an imitation of a "towel rack" which used to be commonplace in every household. For the purposes of this exhibition the rack has three bars so several items can be displayed.

Across from the wall, centrally located, is another white cabinet which functions as an "island" in the middle of the gallery. Random household items are exhibited here, such as embroidered curtains, and decorations for exhaust hood. The choice of the items exhibited was guided by the exhibition narrative, but also by desire to exhibit every typological group of objects and to point to every family which spared their items for research and documentation purposes, the exhibition and photos for the catalogue.

The catalogue was financed by the Italian Community of Bale and it is bilingual. Sandro Cergna, prof., is the language advisor - one of the objectives of the exhibition was to stress the specific local dialect, Istrioto, still spoken in Bale, which can be nicely documented through names of objects.

In addition to texts and stories used in the exhibition, items catalogue takes up most space in the catalogue. All objects are documented and presented in the catalogue. Photos of the authors can be seen alongside items they crafted, as well as information on when and where the item was crafted, its purpose, and its author.

Ivana Čehić Rabljenović is the author of the visual arts exhibition and she designed the catalogue.

By way of a conclusion we can say that the exhibition "Memories Embroidered in Bale" left a powerful impression on the local community. More than 500 people from Bale, and more than 1000 foreign visitors visited the exhibition, in the period from May to end of July when the exhibition was closed. Pupils from Bale elementary school also came to see the exhibition. Some individuals expressed interest at donating items they own to the Museum so the items could be used for the exhibition and these people have expressed their gratitude to the Museum for this expert "field trip" to Bale. It seems that the Museum's longstanding tradition of breaking out of the confines of the Museum is praiseworthy and that it proved fruitful, for example the festival "Pay Attention to What you Eat" and ETHNOfilm were organised, as well exhibitions of filigree in Poreč and Rovinj, exhibition of miners in Raša, and now this three-year-long project in Bale.

Ivona Orlić