

Marija Živković. The Seljan Brothers in Wilderness and Desert. Zagreb, The Ethnographic Museum, 03rd May – 18th November 2018

Exhibition Review

The exhibition "The Seljan Brothers in Wilderness and Desert" was on display at the Ethnographic Museum in Zagreb from the 3rd May to the 18th November 2018. Marija Živković, an ethnologist, senior curator, and the head of Collection of Non-European Cultures, is the author of this exhibition. Market Collective is the author exhibition display. This exhibition follows a story of two brothers with the last name of Seljan, Stevo and Mirko, who are originally from Karlovac, but who travelled the world. They set off from Karlovac at the beginning of 1899, and they spent 14 years travelling around Africa and South America.

The exhibition is divided into ten sections arranged chronologically: Brothers Seljan - childhood and youth in their hometown Karlovac; the period of world travels; life and work until Mirko's and Stevo's death and echoes of their travels. The sections are entitled: The Brothers Seljan - Early Years, Trip to Ethiopia, Trekking the Somalian Wilderness, Ethiopia, In Harare with Ras Makonnen, In Addis Ababa with Prince Menelik II, The Brothers Seljan in Southern Provinces, European Explorers in Africa, Seljan's Departure, Arriving to South America, Ways of Travel and Conditions in Which They Research, Guaira Falls, Looking for Mirko, and The Perception of the Work Undertaken by the Brothers Seljan.

Ethnographic objects such as jewelry, weapons, tools, music instruments and head-dresses are accompanied by text and legends, and archived materials. They are all displayed on the Museum's ground floor and are presented as a combination of blue and earthy tones. Hanging ropes evoke rainforests. Visitors could see objects that are on permanent display, but also objects stored at the Museum's depo. This exhibition introduces us to geographical, historical, social and cultural characteristics of countries such as Abyssinia (Ethiopia), Peru, Paraguay, Argentina and Brazil - countries which the brothers visited. We also learn about political circumstances which shaped (paradigmatically and/or financially) their expeditions; about political and social turmoil in countries in which they stayed, about regulations, about what you are and are not allowed to do and obligations imposed upon the brothers by the countries they visited and which in turn led to, for example, changing their planned routes (in East Africa). Sources of information are numerous for each of these segments: photos, newspaper articles, contracts, postcards, maps, personal diaries, letters... All of this was used to reconstruct and present *Odysseys* (which is what the newspapers then used to described their voyages).

The brothers' versatility is very impressive and it is skillfully and masterfully presented and accentuated in this exhibition. They used historic, travel and geography literature they could find, they marked specific features of climate, plants, and animals, they

wrote down information on ethnic minorities they met during their travels, they drew maps, gave lectures, communicated with heads of states (princes, kings) and academic circles (cartographers and geographers). They bonded with Croatian migrants (for example in Argentina) and worked on projects of building traffic infrastructure in areas that were not well connected until then. They were documentarists, artists, public speakers, writers, successful negotiators, funding applicants, collectors, benefactors, active participants in political events in countries they visited, but also great patriots. Various news outlets, home and abroad, wrote about them (for example, a public lecture that the brothers were going to give in Chicago was announced, and they were called Croatians - ambassadors of Abyssinia), they were often invited to give talks, they were awarded academic diplomas, and they secured funding during their expeditions.

There is an interactive section and visitors can participate actively in three activities: the visitors can use the treadmill to build awareness of walking as the main way of movement in expedition. They can use a rowing machine to simulate rowing which represents sailing down a river in Brazil for 367 kilometers. When you pull the rope a sound comes out - the visitors "sail" into the atmosphere of travelling by ship, and they can listen to pre-recorded paragraphs from their personal diaries. This part of the exhibition suggests the physical strength is necessary to set off on journey. An improvised tent is set up in the centre. Inside the tent there is an exceptional exhibit - a map drawn by Mirko Seljan when they were travelling in Africa. If we take into consideration the context - maps were not yet available for all parts of the world - this segment of the brothers' activities - drawing maps encourages us to think about expeditions undertaken at that time, determined by the colonial context and the brothers' contribution to the development of the world cartography.

The story of brothers Seljan as travellers who (mostly on foot, by clearing paths and undergrowth, riding on horses or rowing in boats) went to parts of Africa and South America more than 100 years ago when this parts were yet uncharted and impassable is fascinating. At the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century brothers' Seljan did not have access to technical, map, communication or medical aides, nor to means of transport as we know them today. It is precisely the fact that modern sciences and areas began to arise at that time (e.g. geography, cartography) that points to the framework and purpose (although not exclusively) of their expeditions. In line with their sponsors' interests (resources, raw materials, political and economic power, conquering paths and rivers and researching passability) the expeditions meant an empirical confirmation and documentation of undiscovered areas which were blind spots in maps available at that time.

Attentive visitors will benefit from a library hung up on walls which complements the main text and legends for extra information. Visitors can read more about the topics presented on pin-boards, such as: Amharic language, Rastafaris, Boer Wars. Chosen paragraphs taken from their diaries are also exhibited, as well as information on various ethnic groups Seljan brothers came into contact with during their travel, and the exploitation of local workers, immigrants, and animals for raw materials (rubber, coffee, sugar cane, gold, ivory).

Another important topic which this exhibition opens up is the role of Croatian diaspora communities in their expeditions. The awareness of Croatian name and identity was a permanent feature that arose out of the brothers' activities. Active contribution that the brothers made to resolving infrastructural problems and transport connections in areas inhabited by Croatian diaspora (e.g. Argentina) is also displayed. The brothers Seljan kept in touch with their homeland: they wrote and published texts, held public lectures, exchanged letters with distinguished people, and sent objects to the then National Museum in Zagreb.

The section on Stevo Seljan's life presents a multitude of family photos, we learn that their "Odyssey" was rounded off in Zagreb when Zora Seljan, Stevo's oldest daughter, who studied Brazilian folklore after having travelled to Brazil, donated objects relating to Brazilian traditional culture to the Museum.

The section Echoes of the brother's travels reveals that the fascinating story still goes on. Movies, novels, travelogues, comics, articles and expeditions are still inspired by the brothers. The Centre for Expeditions, Research and Culture "The Brothers Seljan" in Karlovac has organised several expeditions inspired by the brothers Seljan. Numerous contemporary travel writers also draw inspiration from their adventures. The exhibition is rich in additional educational content. In addition to "regular" guided tours (in Croatian and English), public lectures and workshops were organized. They all focused on geographical and cultural spaces the brothers travelled. Students who study ethnology and cultural anthropology at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Zagreb who enrolled the course Ethnocultural View of the World visited the exhibition. They were given a guided tour and they discussed the movie *Mato Crosso* from 1931 which is also a part of the exhibition and which was lent the author by the Penn Museum in Pennsylvania. The movie is an important ethnographic material which encourages deliberations on colonialism and the way Western researchers and the locals interacted.

The virtual part of the exhibition which is an additional segment of the story is available on the website bracaseljan.emz.hr. The website abounds with visual and textual material, documents, photos and maps. Sections covered include: Explorations by the Brothers Seljan, Collections, Sources, Entertainment, Maps, Objects, Photographs, Manuscripts, Books, Articles and References. This makes the story of the brothers Seljan accessible to wider audiences and it will remain open and available even after the exhibition closes. The virtual exhibition contains an interactive part which brings a specific topic closer to young visitors in an educational and fun way. The story of the brothers Seljan flowed from a part of the permanent exhibition, i.e. from the Collection of Non-European Cultures. From a research, systematic and conceptual points of view the exhibition potentially represents a quality contribution to musings on the permanent exhibition by making inroads into important and intriguing topics like colonialism, racism, ethnocentrism, identity, travelling, presentation and collection of ethnographic objects.

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