

Zvezdana Antoš. The Image Collection. Zagreb, The Ethnographic Museum, 2017, p.129

Catalogue Review

"The Image Collection" by Zvezdana Antoš, PhD and museum advisor, was published in 2017 by the Ethnographic Museum in Zagreb as the 4th museum collections catalogue. It is written in Croatian, but is entirely translated to English. In total 9 chapters extend over 192 pages. Above all this book gives an overview of a rich museum collection which was collected for over a century. Other relevant topics stemming out of the collected materials are also covered in this book.

In the introduction the author tracks processes which enabled the creation of this visual art collection, the backbone of which was folk subject matter, and this is what still ties it together nowadays. The author builds contemporary scientific interpretations onto this, as a methodological guideline of sorts which is more prominent or less prominent depending on a particular unit, i.e. a group of objects at issue. The fundamental understanding of a painting is that a painting is a testimony to the history, or, in other words, a painting can be variously used as historical evidence (Peter Burke).

The following chapters come after the introduction: The Discovery of Popular Culture and The Political Significance of Popular Culture and Foundation of the Museum Collections. They guide us towards the interpretation of visual arts collection, listed in The Register of Cultural Goods of the Republic of Croatia, as the central topic. In these chapters the author analyses the interest for folk culture which has always manifested itself as the desire to collect objects, and explains that visual arts played a significant role in creating and shaping cultural and national identity.

In the chapter The History of Image Collection Zvezdana Antoš documents the history of visual arts collection and discusses the purpose of a specific painting, painter's interests, and who commissioned a given painting. She puts special focus on art works which focus on topics related to life on farm and which depict villagers in folk costumes by academy-trained artists. Some of them are not widely known, while others are renowned Croatian artists (for example, Emanuel Vidović, Tomislav Krizman, Ljubo Babić, etc.). For some only one piece of artwork is mentioned, whereas some are represented through a set of paintings (for example, Zdenka Sertić, who worked at the Museum). The author especially emphasizes specific moments in artists' lives and artistic production which tie them to folk culture based on the chosen topic, or those from which they drew some kind of inspiration.

A chapter on the so called documentary or ethnographic style follows in which the author discusses drawings, watercolour paintings, and engravings by foreign artists who recorded peculiarities of Croatian regions as a kind of travelogue from the second half of the 19th century. They mostly depicted typical villagers in traditional clothes, usually when they were trading or when they gathered for a traditional celebration.

The author stresses the need to think critically and the need to be aware of the context in which these works of art were created because idealization of the depicted scenes was an important factor. The author traces the employment of these works of art in research on traditional forms in the past, but also the way they were used in exhibitions in the Ethnographic Museum.

The author has made a significant contribution by analysing the part of collection which encompasses religious art, the collection of which was a staple ever since the Museum opened. The author talks about these works in the chapter on religious art. She breaks down religious artworks into two sub-groups: votive paintings and stained glass paintings. She does not only see them as testimonies to the extent of worship of individual saints or the extent of themes related to Mary and Jesus Christ, but as indicators of cultural level in a particular area. She stresses the fact that iconographic approach in terms of attribution as "reading" paintings is inadequate in order for us to grasp their full significance, i.e. to understand what worshipping the paintings of particular saints or Virgin Mary meant to a common person. Zvezdana Antoš uses findings from other authors' research (Jasna Čapo Žmegač, Marijana Belaj) in which they examined specific aspects of people's religiosity for her own study of religious art in this collection.

Furthermore, in line with elaboration on socio-historical context in which the collection was created, from Vladimir Tkalčić's initiative for the collection of visual arts material which contained depictions of folk customs to today, the author is especially interested in the way in which recent socio-political changes have affected interest in folk religious art. She takes note of the negative effect on collecting religious art at the time of dechristianization as part and parcel of socialism, and the positive effect during the Croatian Civil War and the post-War period in which interest for religious art significantly increased. Even in this segment the collection is viewed in line with the recent trends of merging traditional culture and religious and national identity, which in turn evokes the past.

In the end, in addition to the chapter on stained glass paintings from north-western Croatia and the assumptions regarding their origin and art type, the chapter on naive art as a specific phenomenon of Croatian (modern) art which was influenced by stained glass paintings follows naturally.

The book ends with a short conclusion in which the author succinctly summarizes the material and turns our attention to further interpretations. Any given topic can become a research topic in its own - relevant literature and works cited all point to this. This kind of open-endedness is an invitation to undertake further research of this extremely broad topic which has never come to the limelight of Croatian ethnology or cultural anthropology, but was only vaguely present. This book will therefore be useful for prospective research of aspects of art and Croatian cultural phenomena.

This book is also significant from a museum's point of view. It indirectly touches upon the long and precarious road from the existing catalogues and inventories used in museums to the contemporary inventories and towards the national computer program

(M+ +) with the goal of achieving a higher level of professional processing which makes the collection a cultural good of the Republic of Croatia. This especially refers to those collections which were collected over a long period. A multitude of problems arises when processing these collections, sometimes baffling, and the results seem meaningless. The author elevated it to the next level in this book. She charted the course from museum documentation seen as an exploratory process to a new expert and scientific interpretation which gave the visual arts collection new wings.

Taking everything into consideration it can be said that this book by Zvezdana Antoš interprets the Ethnographic Museum visual arts collection in a contemporary museum manner which resonates with recent approaches adopted by Croatian and European ethnology and cultural anthropology, but also stresses the historical aspect. I would especially like to commend exquisite photographs and graphic design.

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