

Aida Brenko, Mareta Kurtin i Vesna Zorić. "Hat off!" A storyabout (un)covering the head. Zagreb, The Ethnographic Museum, 24th September 2019 – 31st December 2020

Exhibition Review

Considering the fact that the first objects in the collections of the Ethnographic Museum in Zagreb were women's hats or women's *poculica*, married women's caps, which are currently still among the most numerous objects, the decision to mark the last year's centennial anniversary with an exhibition dedicated primarily to this type of museum objects – headwear, appears only logical. The initial decision on the duration of the exhibition throughout 2020 proved to be sensible in the long-run against the backdrop of the pandemic, in difficult conditions and it was additionally aggravated by the unexpected natural disaster that hit Zagreb. During the period in which efforts are being made to repair the damage of the "shaken" foundations of the historicist urban identity, as well as efforts towards the renovation of destroyed museum buildings and normalisation of social interaction, the exhibition topic has been extraordinarily vividly actualised through real events in the atmosphere of uncertain expectations of a recovered vision of the future. The issue of the head has suddenly become a crucial one, both at the private and public level, as it is not difficult to lose it in uncertain circumstances and one certainly needs to be able to keep it.

In the introductory text of the exhibition, the curators' stance on this project has been ambitiously defined: "Covering or uncovering of the head can convey complex moral meanings, as well as religious, national or class affiliation or belonging, economic position, occupation, gender, age, marital status or participation in a ritual in the manner that is binding and coercing. These functions of headwear are important for the community as head covering conditioned merely by physical needs is currently almost non-existent...". Exhibition authors Aida Brenko M. Sc., Mareta, Mareta Kurtin and Vesna Zorić adopted a stratified approach to the topic, which has been reflected in a concise conceptual structure of the exhibition that consistently and clearly intertwines different levels of functional, symbolic and material status of headwear as museum objects, as well as a specific communication tool in a historically variable structure of everyday life customs, which refers to different cultural contexts of Croatia, Europe and the world. All the thematic units of the exhibition (Protective Role of Headwear, Magical Role of Headwear, Single Girl Status, Hair and Ornaments, Wedding Headpieces, A Married Woman Status, Religious Context, Materials and Techniques, Head Covering and Identity, History of the Craft of Hat-Making and Millinery, The Craft of Hat-Making and its Tools, The Craft of Millinery, Zagreb Hatters and Milliners, The Use of Hat-Making and Millinery Artistry in Fashion and Design) have been accompanied by concise and informationally rich explanations about both the purpose and the role of the exhibited objects. The course of presentation of topics includes the most basic

to the more complex roles assumed by headwear in rural communities of Croatia and throughout the region (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia, Macedonia and Albania) in the past, through emphasising the significance of a specific status attributed to different headwear by religious communities or different “urban tribes” across continents and it ends in the presentation of the role of fashionable hats or headwear items in the modern civic culture of Zagreb, as well as the presentation of the work of the most relevant contemporary Zagreb-based hat designers.

In accordance with the anniversary features, the exhibition opened with a special thematic chronology of the Ethnographic Museum, in which the museological stance about the relevance of the exhibited objects and the topic of headwear has been presented in the paper released by this museum institution since its inception. Irrespective of the linear sequence of events, the chronology has no strict form of the timeline, but it is built in line with the system of information grouping around the defined points in time and important personalities, which in the visual art collection was arranged in the way that the documented information (texts and photographs) have been placed on cylindrical shapes through which rhythmical dynamics has been achieved in terms of content transparency and retention of focused attention of the visitors to this type of information, which by themselves do not have the visual impressiveness of the artefacts and require readers’ concentration (for the same reason the letters could perhaps have been larger). Protruding from the wall surface like time capsules, these shapes provide, among others, also the information about the foundation of the museum and the significant contribution of its first director, the industrialist Salomon Berger, who takes the credit for the formation of the traditional *folk costume* and headwear collection, we find out about the reasons behind collecting, as well as about inspirational significance of these objects in terms of comprehension and strengthening of the concept of national art around the year 1900. The latter has been shown through what at the time was the trend of taking photographs in traditional *folk costumes*, which affected also the civic society and higher social classes. Documentary records and photographs provide information about field and scientific research contributions resulting from adventures of collecting such as the one in boats on the Kupa River, led by the curator Vladimir Tkalčić in 1923. Through an overview of the contributions of individual museum directors and curators (Ivo Franić, Milovan Gavazzi, Marijana Gušić, Jelka Radauš Ribarić), changes in methods of interpretation and presentation have been highlighted. Moreover, a contemporary shift of interest towards everyday life among all the social classes has been pointed out, as well as from the aspect of cultural anthropology, which provided the motive for the foundation of the Modern Clothing Collection in 2014.

A broad horizon of phenomenological sense for the topic of the exhibition authors shows through the introductory text that provides the specific research objectives and the messages conveyed by the exhibition, through a specifically presented chronology of the museum, structured in accordance with the basic thematic backbone, through separate exhibition sections and subtopics that focus on exhibiting the head in different identity formations, as well as from the traditional framework to contemporary fashion. Two basic aspects of understanding of the protective role of headwear have

been presented at the start of the exhibition – both the practical and the symbolic aspect, which have been present in the history of human civilisation since ancient times. The first display case features different types of basic headwear used across the Croatian regions (Konavle, Petrinja, Čazma, Samobor, as well as on the islands Pag and Silba), in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Vojvodina, Montenegro, as well as in the Caucasus region or in Africa, while working outdoors in different weather conditions. Some objects like shepherds' hoods from Topol or Caucasian *bashlyk* impress with their organic unity of shapes and materials, as well as the simplicity of expression of forms exert a full impact on contemporary sensitivity, while others surprise with the bizarre choice of materials, like a hedgehog cap from Samobor. Home-made for own needs using different materials (straw, leaves of grass, tree bark, animal hide and textile of both vegetable and animal origin) have unassuming features, while the second display case features exhibited objects of apotropaic purpose whose appearance abounds in “eccentric” makes and materials – different feathers, specific plant roots, animal teeth, corals and seashells or coins.

In the next section through three display cases we find out more about the role of headwear in different parts of Croatia in marking the status of women concerning their age or their social status in different stages of life through youth, wedding and marital status. It is interesting to point out the role traditionally attributed to hair as a special sign of feminine beauty, seductiveness and intimacy, which is referred to by different customs in connection with the obligation of head coverings, cutting or even shaving the hair of married women in some parts of Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Albania. The uncovered head primarily exposed its most important ornament – the hair and it was the symbol of the difference between single girls and bachelorettes and the very change of the hair style was considered a meaningful communication signal in the community. Interestingly, hairstyle forms simultaneously show features of such personal nature as sexual maturation status with community identity. In fact, specific regional and local features can be identified by the number of braids and the way they are made. The exhibited objects in these sections show a wide range of differences in terms of colour or the quantity of ornaments, as well as in the methods of tying the head scarf, which showed the preparedness for getting married. It is important to highlight the board with exhibits of valuable oriental hair ornaments made of precious metal, alloys, semi-precious stones, glass imitation of gemstones and coins, which was used with caps and head scarves that had already been decorated and they frequently relied on its apotropaic function. The set of customs that dictate head coverings for women, as well as men has been addressed from the stance of religious context including historical ideological bases for such imposition in all the three Abrahamic religions, in co-operation with both the Islamic and the Jewish communities Bet Israel in Zagreb. The authorial team is not striving to avoid critical emphasis of the fact that components of personal and cultural identities are mixed in the construction of religious identities and hence the handmaid's costume from the series inspired by the novel by Margaret Atwood “The Handmaid's Tale” dating back to 1986 has been included in this section, which has nowadays become a symbol of fight for women's rights throughout the world.

In the section named Head Covering and Identities, head coverings have been grouped in accordance with the way they express the unity of the community in the spirit of strengthening the feeling of nationality (Pileus, Illyrian cap, coverings decorated with the triband or checkerboard, the typical hat from Prigorje, Šibenik and Lika) or expression of political orientation, such as Mao Tse-Tung's hat or the Palestinian scarf or subcultural belonging.

Moreover, the segment of long Zagreb hat-making and millinery tradition with the objects of reputable family crafts Kobali, Cahun, Škrgatić, Horvatić and Šešir d.o.o, and it is also important to point out as a separate unit the focus on technological aspect through the presentation of molds and tools used in hat making from the Collection of Traditional Crafts of the Ethnographic Museum in Zagreb, donated to the Museum by Jovan Balaban, Head of Hat Makers' Section of the Croatian Tradesmen Association (in the 1930's) and Ivan Horvatić, the Zagreb-based cap and hat maker (2017).

The section of contemporary design and fashion includes the work of artists like Staša Čimbur, Silvio Vujičić, Tihana Mikša, Josipa and Marijana Bronić, as well as Madame Demode (Viktorija Vrzesnevska), who addressed the task of head covering design with substantial emancipation, resorting to the method of experimentation and deconstruction of traditional formal and identity patterns, although in hat-making technology they respected the reaffirmation of traditional artistry.

The exhibition title shows the inextricable link between tangible elements such as the cap or hat with fluid and historically inconstant cultural elements, such as customs or identities or the needs for head coverings of different individual motivation. Purification of the visual art exhibition of the designer duo Katarina Perić and Iva Hrvatin, who were in charge also both of the visual identity and the graphic design of the exhibition catalogue, achieves the compliance of ideas with the contextual concept. The focused emphasis on articulation of the idea of materialisation of the immaterial is identifiable upon first glance at the display cases. Reflecting surfaces that have been used for application on the so-called "faces" of black unified modules for display in the form of the head, have a visual and symbolically impressive effect, which shows motivation for this type of decision, striving to prompt the beholder to self-reflection. Simple solutions in the selection of scenic elements come down to several carefully selected elements – mirrors inviting to reflection, black walls annul the impression of natural spaciousness of exhibition space, which has created the effect of controlled attention focus of the visitor to the content exhibited in display cases and highlighted the expressiveness of documented black and white photographs used in close up in the back of display cases.

The exhibition presents objects primarily from museum collections and those borrowed from private collections or personal possessions were used to enhance the sections dedicated to contemporary craft and design production, which is understandable since in that segment of museum collections the museum holdings are insufficient as a result of traditional primary ethnological orientation. The exhibition catalogue provides information on the studious approach adopted by the curators, exhibition authors, which even at first glance expresses monograph ambitions through its volume and through its content it provides an example of a conscientious and comprehensive research and

professional processing. Finally, from the stance of project management it is important also to point out the fact that this project resulted in the idea of an annual cycle of small exhibitions, which, in accordance with the initial plan, were intended to present small private collections of fashionable hat and headwear enthusiasts from whom a proportion of objects has been borrowed for the exhibition, which is simultaneously the result of research preparations for the exhibition. The exhibition entitled “Memories Are Made of This – Hats from the Private Collection of Đurđa Tedeschi” was opened on the 15th November 2019, in the round exhibition premises located in the section of the building under the dome. The intention was to capitalise, to the greatest possible extent, all the efforts invested in complex preparations of such a complex project – ranging from long research work to development of comprehensive contact network, which, in addition to private lenders, also included religious communities (the Islamic community and Bet Israel Jewish Community in Zagreb) and civic associations (Solidarna Association), providing the opportunity to create an atmosphere of more active, as well as more mindful and more dynamic communication with the audience.

Jasmina Fučkan