

## The Furniture Collection

The ethnological study written by Zvezdana Antoš, Ph.D., museum advisor and head of the Furniture Collection at the Ethnographic Museum in Zagreb, boasts several distinctions. It is characterized by a high level of expertise, professionalism, complexity, thoroughness, comparability and problematising the topic in a broader context that includes interdisciplinary ethnological, cultural-anthropological and museological approaches. Zvezdana Antoš presents the content clearly and expertly with analytically layered argumentation and articulation. The study is the result of the author's long-term in-depth examination of the Collection and its rich holdings and accompanying material, both on a theoretical and scientific level, as well as on a practical level, primarily based on field research conducted in different parts of Croatia. Antoš has been the Head of the Furniture Collection for 26 years and the study reveals her detailed expert knowledge of the Collection, interpreting it as a living and fluid phenomenon and observing it in the context of the time and social milieu in which it was created. That is precisely why this volume is not only an excellent analytical and professional study of a museum collection, but it is also an excellent example of modern treatment of museum material, which the author interprets in a current and contemporary museological manner.

The text of the bilingual volume *The Furniture Collection* (in Croatian with a complete translation into English) has a consistent structure divided into seven key chapters, analysing the problem-matter on 262 pages. A special introductory chapter is devoted to the critical presentation of relevant literature and sources, as well as the methodology of work on previous research projects regarding the processing and documenting the subject matter of the Collection. This is followed by chapters titled *The National Style*, *Folk Art as Original Visual Expression*, *Stylistic Influences and the Symbolism of Objects*, *Development of the Museum's Furniture Collection*, and the chapter *Exhibition of Objects from the Furniture Collection*, in which the author analyses the Collection through fundamental ethnological, cultural-anthropological, artistic and museological questions. The study is completed by a catalogue of objects organized into meaningfully selected thematic units presented by means of different stories and relevant references. The additional documentary and comprehensive value of this volume is enriched by original photographs taken by Goran Vranić and Nina Koydl of museum objects and their details, as well as photographs of interior taken by Petar Strmečki and taken from the Photographic Archive of the Ethnographic Museum. Lastly, the graphic and visual design by Viola Šebalj creates a rounded, aesthetic and transparent visual representation.

The elaboration of collection material interpreted through the so-called national style, folk art and its symbolism, places the collection in a socio-political context. The text interprets the im-



Picture 1. Promotion of the book, *Ethnographic museum, Zagreb*, 20th October 2022 (from left to right): Orchestra of the Ensemble Lado, Goranka Horjan, Zvezdana Antoš, Olga Orlić, Tanja Roženbergar), Photo by Nina Koydl

portance and value of museum objects for designing and highlighting of national identities at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In this regard, artistic collections of ethnographic material, primarily furniture and textiles, had a patriotic and nation-building role, and were exhibited at international world expositions. It was precisely folk culture that became an important element in the shaping of national identity, while the objects in the collection were understood as objects of national identity. In furniture-making, the national style is represented by decorative elements, employing different techniques of decoration, carving, perforation and traditional motifs of peasant Baroque. The author thus also delineates the collection in terms of symbolic visual language, stressing that furniture, as an ornament of every home, also possessed symbolic meanings of signs, decorations and ornaments, i.e., a symbolic and intimate role, thus determining the social status of its owners and their way of life. Each item in the Collection presents the person who bought, preserved and used that item.



Picture 2. Promotion of the book *The Furniture Collection*, Interliber – International Book’s Fair, Zagreb, 12<sup>th</sup> November 2022 (from left to right: Snježana Radovanlija Mileusnić, Zvezdana Antoš, Olga Orlić), Photo by Darko Antoš

The museological treatment of the material is of utmost importance, presented in the introductory chapter and in the chapters *Development of the Museum’s Furniture Collection*, and *Exhibition of Objects from the Furniture Collection*. In addition to general expert and scientific literature and written and pictorial sources, the author also examined the Museum’s early inventory books and records from documents, thus incorporating the context of museum documentation. In doing so, the volume also draws attention to the value and importance of the museum’s archival system, which contains a compendium of information about the material, as well as its non-material portion, which is especially important for museum operation and memory preservation. The museological horizon of the collection is explored through the creation and development of the collection, accompanied by an overview of different modes of exhibiting objects from the Collection, as well as an overview of collecting criteria and museum policies. In Zvezdana Antoš’ volume, museum objects are not only observed as museum content, but also as objects for

museum exhibition, which imbues them with entirely new meanings and interpretations. The material was presented in the multimedia exhibition *Furniture in Croatia, an ethnological view of the interior decoration of the home*, which the author prepared in 1998, accompanied by a catalogue, a CD-ROM and a rich accompanying programme. The exhibition was also hosted at the Slovene Ethnographic Museum in 1999 and at the Schloss Museum Kittsee Burgenland in 2001.

The author's scientific examination of the Furniture Collection thematises broader anthropological concepts about the culture of daily life, the living culture, standards, the culture of individual spaces and household culture. Employing different models of analysis and interpretation and of the collections, Antoš presents a new understanding of museum objects, implying that an ethnographic object is not simply an object, but rather a certain point of view of its understanding. Expert conclusions confirm the social determination of the Collection and its values, constantly evolving in time and space, which underscores the necessity of rethinking contemporary collecting policies for the development of the Collection in the future. The objects are examined in a wider social and cultural context and perceived as providing creative inspiration, evidenced, among other things, by cooperations with different faculties, projects realised in the field of design, and plans for the future.

This fundamental study is particularly significant in the context of preparing the Ethnographic Museum permanent display. It would be interesting to compare this material with museum collections of museums in neighboring countries, such as the Curated Collection of the Culture of Living of the Slovene Ethnographic Museum and the Curated Collection of Art and Artistic Sources, the Furniture Collection of the Maribor Regional Museum, as well as other materials kept in other museums in Europe. Emphasis is placed on virtual and digitized forms of museum documentation and communication. In view of the experience permeated by the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, a complex digital paradigm is the reality, but not only in matters relating to digitized museum materials, digital visibility of museums and diverse forms of communication, but also in terms of other problematic discourses.

After the pandemic, the museum institution is finally understood in a transformed – digital sense. Antoš follows current trends in this aspect of her professional work as well. This volume will also be available online, a portion of the material has already been presented in the online exhibition *A Chest Full of Digital Secrets*, created during the COVID-19 pandemic, while the interactive platform *Furniture Stories – Intimate Spaces of Daily Life* is currently in preparation.

This extensive and thorough volume published by the Ethnographic Museum in 2022, with a print run of 200 copies, is an exceptional contribution to documenting the Furniture Collection and to the Ethnographic Museum itself as a compendium of knowledge about its materials and mission among a wider interested audience. As a curator and museologist with over 30 years of professional experience, familiar with the pitfalls of museological work and the diverse problems related to scientific examination of museum objects, I am able to validate Zvezdana Antoš' study as an excellent and significant contribution to the contemporary effort of documenting and interpreting cultural heritage.