

## THE ROLE OF THE MARITIME AND HISTORY MUSEUM OF THE CROATIAN LITTORAL IN COLLECTING AND PRESERVING OF OBJECTS CONFISCATED AFTER WORLD WAR II

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### INTRODUCTION

Like Rijeka, the city where the Maritime and History Museum of the Croatian Littoral (PPMHP) is the largest and oldest museum, the history of the Museum has been marked by separations and mergers, renaming and transformations. PPMHP is the successor to two museums on either side of the Rječina River, the Rijeka City Museum (Italian: *Museo Civico Fiume*), founded in 1875, and the Sušak City Museum, founded in 1933 at a time when Rijeka was divided between two states, the Kingdom of Italy and the Kingdom of Yugoslavia.<sup>1</sup>

After World War II, in 1948, the *Museo Civico* changed its name to the City History Museum (*Museo Storico Cittadino*) and was housed in the former Governor's Palace. The Sušak City Museum, originally located in the City Hall in Sušak, moved to the former residence of Count Nugent on Trsat in 1948 and changed its name to the

Museum of the Croatian Littoral. In the same year, the two museums merged under the joint name of the Museum of the Croatian Littoral, but the changes did not end there and the Museum changed its name again in 1953 to the National Museum, from which the maritime department was separated in 1960 and the Maritime Museum was founded.<sup>2</sup> The National Museum was abolished, and the collections were merged with the Maritime Museum, and on June 21, 1961, the People's Committee of the Stari Grad Municipality passed a resolution to change the name of the institution, so the Maritime Museum changed its name to the Maritime and History Museum of the Croatian Littoral Rijeka. The entire holdings were moved to the former Governor's Palace in 1956, except for the People's Liberation War Collection (NOB), which remained on Trsat, and from it the Museum of the National Revolution, today's Rijeka City Museum,<sup>3</sup> was founded in 1961. Since 1975, the Museum has been in the Governor's Palace, where it has operated to this day, along with the relocated collections in Kastav and Lipa.

During the administration of the Kingdom of Italy, the collection of materials for the Rijeka City Museum (*Museo Civico Fiume*) continued, but during World War II a significant part of the museum's holdings and documentation was taken to Italy, starting in 1941, and especially after the capitulation of Italy in 1943. Six crates of archaeological finds and several paintings were taken. According to a memo from the former director of the PPMHP, Radmila Matejčić, to the Regional Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments dated 10 March 1977, the crates contained 315 archaeological finds from Rijeka sites, along with paintings by Rijeka artists

Giovanni Simonetti, Enrico Fonda, Francesco Colombo and the Hungarian Gyula Benczur. The works of art were shipped to the Manin villa in the town of Codroipo in the Friuli Venice Giulia region (*Friuli Venezia Giulia*) on 14 March 1941 and were never returned.<sup>4</sup>

## **PILOT PROJECT TO DETERMINE THE PROVENANCE OF MUSEUM OBJECTS**

The provenance of objects received by the PPMHP, or its predecessors, in the period after World War II has never been thoroughly investigated. However, several generations of Museum curators, if documentation existed, recorded the source of acquisition of objects on inventory cards or in computer system records, along with some of the original documentation on the acquisition of objects that has also been preserved.

Research into the provenance of objects received by the Museum after World War II began with the Museum's inclusion in the *Pilot Project to Determine the Provenance of Museum Objects Confiscated During and After WWII*, and was conducted by researching the materials of the Croatian State Archives, the HR-HDA-2117 fonds, which refers to the Commission for Gathering and Protection of Cultural Monuments and Antiquities (KOMZA), the primary documentation of the Museum, and its archives.

The Museum's primary documentation contains metadata that attests to the acquisition of objects through the People's Liberation Committee (NOO): the source of acquisition is recorded as "People's Liberation Committee Rijeka" or the

abbreviation "NOO Rijeka," "National Property Administration" or "UND."

The Museum's archives contain receipts of artworks, lists of artworks, and written communication between the Museum and the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of Croatia (NRH), the Conservation Institute, and KOMZA. The documentation has only been partially processed, organised, and digitised.

## **THE ROLE OF MUSEUM IN COLLECTING AND PRESERVING OBJECTS CONFISCATED AFTER WORLD WAR II**

The legislative framework for the nationalisation and collection of objects after World War II was defined by the *Decision on the Transfer of Enemy Property under State Administration to State Ownership over the Property of Absent Persons and the Sequestration of Property Forcibly Removed by Occupying Authorities* from 1944, the *Decision on the Protection and Preservation of Cultural Monuments and Antiquities* from 20 February 1945, and the *Act on the Gathering, Preservation, and Distribution of Books and Other Cultural, Educational and Art Objects that Became Government Property According to the Resolution of the Antifascist Council of the People's Liberation of Yugoslavia* from 24 May 1945.

Based on these laws and decisions, in June 1945, the Ministry of Education of the Federal State of Croatia founded KOMZA and on July 31 issued the *Instruction for the Establishment and Operation of Collection Centres*, and on November 23 of the same year proposed the establishment of district collection centres alongside city museums,

archives and libraries in the places where they existed, for their staff to work on collection and protection.<sup>5</sup> Pasini Tržec states that, following this *Instruction*, a district collection centre was established in Sušak in the summer of 1946 alongside the Sušak City Museum, the third in the People's Republic of Croatia after Varaždin (autumn 1945) and Osijek (April 1946),<sup>6</sup> but it is more accurate to say that there were two physical collection centres on the ground, one alongside the Sušak Museum in the skyscraper of the Croatian Cultural Centre and one in the Olga villa in Pećine on the west bank of the Rječina River.

Just a few days after the decision to establish KOMZA and a month before the decision to establish a collection centre in Sušak, on June 1, 1945, the District NOO for the Croatian Littoral sent a memo to the City NOO Sušak<sup>7</sup> (Fig. 1) requesting that “an educational worker be appointed to save and preserve libraries and art objects, especially in blocked buildings,” that “written permission be issued to inspect such buildings” and that such a permission also be issued to “academic painter Vilim Svečnjak, who, together with another person you appoint, will inspect the works of art.” Further, on June 4, 1945, the City NOO Sušak issued a certificate appointing Vilim Svečnjak and Miroslav Blažičević “as commissioners for the preservation of the library and all art objects and objects of historical value, primarily those that are among the blocked and confiscated property of enemy persons, and persons who have left our territory. For this purpose, the appointed comrades have the right of access to blocked buildings, and the right to separate and store all objects for which they find it appropriate” (Fig. 2).<sup>8</sup>

The appointed commissioner, Vilim Svečnjak, a Zagreb academic painter and

member of the Zemlja group, who was sentenced to death *in absentia* by the Ustaša Court Martial in Zagreb in 1942, had been in Sušak since 1940, where he taught art education in high school, organised a branch of the Association of Croatian Artists (ULUH) in Rijeka, and led the establishment of the Gallery of Fine Arts in 1948, of which he was the first director.<sup>9</sup> The gallery is located on the second floor of the former Governor's Palace, where at that time the “Rijeka half” of today's PPMHP, the City History Museum (*Museo Storico Cittadino*), was also located. The second commissioner, Miroslav Blažičević from Rijeka, a painter and restorer by profession, was the director of the Museum of the Croatian Littoral, the “Sušak half” present-day PPMHP, from 1946, its administrator from 1945, and the director of the unified Museum under the same name in the former Governor's Palace from 1948 (Fig. 3).

## SEVERAL CASES OF PROPERTY RECEIVED AT THE MUSEUM

Although several hundred objects arrived at the Museum in the period after World War II, by researching the documentation in the Museum and the KOMZA fonds in the Croatian State Archives, this paper analyses three illustrative cases which have been partially documented. These are the objects of the Hütterott family from Rovinj, the Fröhlich family from Zagreb, and Dagobert Müller and Zorka Ružić from Sušak.

### THE HÜTTEROTT CASE

The case of the Hütterott family was extensively studied by Tajana Ujčić from the

Rovinj City Museum. Most of the family's legacy ended up in the Rovinj City Museum and the Croatian State Archives in Pazin. The Hütterott family owned several islands in the Rovinj archipelago and the areas of Zlatni Rt (Golden Cape) and Škaraba. Two of the last members of the family, Marie Augusta Henriette Hütterott and her daughter Clara Ida Barbara Elisabeth, met the end of World War II on their estate on the St. Andrew Island and disappeared under unclear circumstances in May 1945.<sup>10</sup> The Hütterotts' property was nationalised by a decision of the Administrative Department of the District People's Liberation Committee for Istria on 1 June 1945. The last member of the family, Hanna Grabmayr, died without heirs in 1960, two years after she initiated compensation proceedings, the outcome of which has not been investigated.<sup>11</sup> Part of the estate ended up in the PPMHP by KOMZA's decision on 12 June 1948, which ordered that archaeological objects be segregated for the Archaeological Museum of Istria in Pula and that the remaining objects be sent to the Museum of the Croatian Littoral in Sušak.<sup>12</sup>

The answer to the question of why objects from Rovinj and Zagreb came to the Museum in Rijeka is partly found in the idea of the cultural authorities of the time that the Rijeka Museum should be regional, but also including Istria, but it is unknown according to what criteria the objects were selected for Rijeka. The Museum's archives contain a memo from the Museum of the Croatian Littoral to the director of the Archaeological Museum of Istria in Pula, Boris Bačić, dated 29 May, which precedes KOMZA's decision, and which "confirms the receipt of 33 pieces of furniture," which shows that some of

the objects had already arrived at the Museum.<sup>13</sup>

Boris Bačić's report to the KOMZA in Zagreb dated 25 October 1948<sup>14</sup> (Fig. 4) shows that the items were shipped to the Museum of the Croatian Littoral as early as 18 May and that, in addition to the furniture, they also included church equipment. The report is accompanied by a list of objects taken from the St. Andrew Island which were intended for transfer to the "Cultural and History Museum on Trsat" (Fig. 5), then called the Museum of the Croatian Littoral. The Museum's inventory book lists the location of the St. Andrew Island or Red Island and the Hütterott family as the source of supply for the listed furniture. Of the items on the list, the Museum currently houses one chest of drawers, two wardrobes and church furniture from the island chapel – a crucifix, two church benches and a pew. There is still a piece of paper glued with legible text "sent by Bačić Boris" on one of the wardrobes (Fig. 6). Of the listed items, a wardrobe and a chest of drawers are on display in the permanent exhibition of the PPMHP. In a memo from June 1948, Bačić reports that art objects were transferred from the "Red Island near Rovinj" to Fažana, from where they will be shipped to Rijeka, including "an Empire clock, a Baroque altar, parts of a wardrobe" and seven paintings, but he does not specify which paintings they are.<sup>15</sup> According to the data from the old inventory book, the paintings that arrived at the Museum were *Allegory of the Victory of Venice over the League of Cambrai*, a 19<sup>th</sup>-century copy after Palma the Younger, and *The Abduction of Europa*, a 19<sup>th</sup>-century copy after Veronese (Fig. 7). *The Abduction of Europa* was restored and permanently



loaned to the City of Rovinj and exhibited in the City Hall.<sup>16</sup> The location of the other objects is unknown, and they are not in the Museum's holdings, although it contains two Empire clocks, but it is not documented that they originate from Rovinj.

## THE FRÖHLICH CASE

Slavko Kvaternik, the deputy head of the Independent State of Croatia, moved into the villa at then called Josipovac, present-day Tuškanac 15 in Zagreb, in 1941, which used to belong to the Zagreb industrialist and entrepreneur Oskar Fröhlich, a Jew of Czech origin who converted to Catholicism before the war, but was nevertheless persecuted and forced to flee to Italy.<sup>17</sup> According to the mandatory declaration form for Jewish property, which was filled out on behalf of Fröhlich in June 1941 by his cousin Ivo Schwartz, at a time when Kvaternik was already living in the villa, the Fröhlich family removed only three items from the villa "that represent family mementos, or are for the personal use of the owner's children [...] with the knowledge and approval of the wife of Military Commander Kvaternik."<sup>18</sup>

In the KOMZA record of 6 June 1945, "in the apartment at Josipovac 15 / former villa Fröhlich or Kvaternik,"<sup>19</sup> there are objects listed under numbers 9 and 34, next to which "Rijeka Museum" is written in red pastel pencil. Under number 9, "a side table with a marble top and inlays on 4 legs" is listed, and under number 34, "a small chest of drawers with three drawers decorated with inlays." Several versions of the PPMHP documentation record state that the source of the acquisition of the object was the Administration of National Good, and one also lists the number of the

KOMZA decision, but the curators who transferred the decision number from the old inventory book to newer cards and ultimately to the Indigo computer system did not know that it was a KOMZA decision or that the object came from the villa Fröhlich, only that the object originated in Zagreb (Fig. 8). According to the description in the KOMZA record, the records of the objects were found in the computer documentation system under the inventory numbers PPMHP 111871 (Fig. 8a) and PPMHP 112166 (Fig. 9). They are in the museum storage of the Furniture Collection and upon inspection it was established that the number of the KOMZA decision K-III 7/45-34 is written on them (Fig. 8b). Although they do not have similar inventory designations, and the number of the KOMZA decision is recorded in the metadata of only one of them, the objects are located next to each other in the storage room, almost as a whole.

## THE MÜLLER CASE

Dagobert Müller von Thomamühl, an Austro-Hungarian naval officer and inventor, married Zorka Ružić, daughter of the mayor of Sušak, Gjuro Ružić, and they lived in Pećine in Sušak, at what is now Šetalište XIII. divizije Street, house number nine. After the capitulation of Italy in 1943, Rijeka and Sušak came under the administration of the Third Reich as part of the Operational Zone *Adriatic Coast*. Müller von Thomamühl organised and participated in negotiations between the Germans and the People's Liberation Army (NOV) on the withdrawal of the partisans from Sušak. After the negotiations, a group of German soldiers, led by

D. Müller, captured the NOV guard before the Sušak Command managed to destroy the bridges between Rijeka and Sušak.<sup>20</sup> Right before the end of the war and the liberation of Rijeka, Dagobert and Zorka Müller left Sušak and went to Klagenfurt, receiving Austrian citizenship, where Dagobert died in 1956. After his death, Müller, by his own wish and with the permission of the authorities, became the last person buried at the Naval Cemetery in Pula several decades after the cemetery was closed to new burials.<sup>21</sup>

The Museum archives contain two documents related to the Müller family's property, *List II of objects from the sequestered mass of Müller Dagobert, a rentier from Sušak, which were transferred and stored in the premises of the City Museum* (Fig. 10), and a memo from Vilim Svečnjak to the head of the Educational Department of the Sušak City NOO, Vinko Benac, dated June 3, 1945, in which he requests an urgent meeting because he "heard that things are still being dragged and taken from the Müller house and that, according to witnesses, there are also objects of museum value. It is necessary to act in this direction immediately and most energetically to prevent the destruction of objects of artistic and museum value, which, in addition to their historical value, also represent enormous material value and should be considered NATIONAL PROPERTY."<sup>22</sup>

In the Museum's holdings, the Müller family's objects (Fig. 11) are in the Fine Arts Collection, the Collection of Artistic Crafts, the Collection of Furniture, the Collection of Ceramic and Glassware, the Collection of Books and Periodicals, the Collection of Printed Documents, the Collection of Weapons, Military Equip-

ment and Militaria, and the Collection of Clothing and Fashion Accessories. The exact number of objects in the holdings that belonged to the Müller family will be determined after a thorough investigation of the Museum's archives and the documentation of the Rijeka and Sušak NOO and the Conservation Institute in Rijeka.

## CONCLUSION

The complicated history of the PPMHP, the merger of the Rijeka and Sušak museums and ultimately the establishment of all current Rijeka museums from that museum institution, the movement of objects, staff and documentation, along with the circumstance of a large influx of objects in a short period of time and their incomplete documentation, make it impossible or at least significantly difficult to research the provenance of objects in the PPMHP holdings. Thanks to the research into the KOMZA fonds of the Croatian State Archives, it was established that the holdings contain objects belonging to the Fröhlich family from Zagreb, with several objects from the holdings that originate from the St. Andrew Island near Rovinj from the legacy of the Hütterott family, while several other objects from the holdings were also determined to originate from the Müller family from Sušak. This research is an initial investigation of the provenance of objects in the PPMHP holdings, and in order to complete it, it is necessary to organise and study the documentation of all museums that were established on the basis of the pre-war museums of Rijeka and Sušak, i.e., the Rijeka City Museum and the Sušak City Museum, which are, in addition to the PPMHP, the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art and

the Rijeka City Museum. In addition, it is necessary to research the Rijeka Questura fonds to determine which objects from the holdings were confiscated from Jews during World War II, as well as the fonds of the Regional and City People's Liberation Committee in Rijeka and the archives of the Conservation Institute in Rijeka for the period after World War II.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Denis Nepokoj, ed., *Pomorski i povijesni muzej Hrvatskog primorja Rijeka* (Rijeka: Pomorski i povijesni muzej Hrvatskog primorja Rijeka, 2004), 18.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>4</sup> Igor Žic, "Trinaest riječkih Krivokletnika: sudbina kolekcije umjetnina gradonačelnika Ciotte," *Novi list, Mediteran* addition, no. 5, January 28, 1995, 7.

<sup>5</sup> The decisions and *Instruction* are in the Museum's archives.

<sup>6</sup> Iva Pasini Tržec, "Osnutak, organizacijski ustroj i djelovanje Komisije za sakupljanje i očuvanje kulturnih spomenika i starina," *Peristil* 62 (2019): 127.

<sup>7</sup> Until 1961, the area of today's city of Rijeka was administratively divided into three municipalities – Zamet, Rijeka and Sušak.

<sup>8</sup> PPMHP Archives, certificate from the Sušak City NOO on the appointment of Vilim Svečnjak and Miroslav Blažičević as commissioners, 4 June 1945 (transcript).

<sup>9</sup> Branka Arh and Daina Glavočić, *Vilim Svečnjak: 1906 – 1993*. (Zagreb: Galerija Mona Lisa, 2006), 260–269.

<sup>10</sup> Tajana Ujčić, "Dva otoka narodnih dobara: Podržavljenje imovine u Istri na primjerima otoka Sv. Andrije kraj Rovinja i Brionskoga otočja (1945. – 1947./1948.)," *Vjesnik istarskog arhiva* 25 (2018): 169.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 166.

<sup>12</sup> Croatian State Archives, HR-HDA-2117-2-978, memo from KOMZA to the director of the Archaeological Museum of Istria in Pula, Boris Bačić.

<sup>13</sup> PPMHP Archives, memo from the Museum of the Croatian Littoral to the director of the Archaeological Museum of Istria in Pula, Boris Bačić, May 29, 1948.

<sup>14</sup> HR-HDA-2117-2-978.

<sup>15</sup> PPMHP Archives, memo from the director of the Archaeological Museum of Istria in Pula, Boris Bačić, to the Museum of the Croatian Littoral, June 1948.

<sup>16</sup> See: Pavao Lerotić and Tea Zubin Ferri, "Multidisciplinarna istraživanja i valorizacija kopija na primjeru Otmice Europe iz Rijeke," *Portal: godišnjak Hrvatskoga restauratorskog zavoda* 4 (2013): 153–167, <https://hrcak.srce.hr/file/181164> (accessed September 12, 2024).

<sup>17</sup> Ivo Goldstein, ed., *Židovski biografski leksikon: radna verzija* (Zagreb: Leksikografski zavod Miroslav Krleža, s. a.), s. v. "Fröhlich, Oskar," <https://zbl.lzmk.hr/?p=3504> (accessed September 16, 2024).

<sup>18</sup> Iva Pasini Tržec, "O slici *Krštenje vladara* iz Strossmayerove galerije starih majstora," *Radovi Instituta za povijest umjetnosti* 44, no. 1 (2020): 48.

<sup>19</sup> HR-HDA-2117-2-7.

<sup>20</sup> Antun Giron, *Zapadna Hrvatska u Drugom svjetskom ratu* (Rijeka: Adamić, 2004), 154.

<sup>21</sup> *Hrvatska tehnička enciklopedija* (Zagreb: Leksikografski zavod Miroslav Krleža, 2018), s. v. "Müller von Thomamühl, Dagobert," <https://tehnika.lzmk.hr/muller-von-thomamuhl-dagobert/> (accessed September 12, 2024).

<sup>22</sup> PPMHP Archives, Vilim Svečnjak to Vinko Benac, June 3, 1945.

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## ULOGA POMORSKOGA I POVIJESNOGA MUZEJA HRVATSKOG PRIMORJA U PRIKUPLJANJU I ČUVANJU PREDMETA ODUZETIH NAKON DRUGOGA SVJETSKOG RATA

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## IZVORI/SOURCES

Arhiv Pomorskoga i povijesnoga muzeja Hrvatskog primorja Rijeka (Arhiv PPMHP-a)

Hrvatski državni arhiv (HDA), Komisija za sakupljanje i očuvanje kulturnih spomenika i starina, HR-HDA-2117