

Main topic



# Hidden Historia: Reconstruction of the Professional Biographies of the First Female Employees of the Museums in Zagreb

*The project Hidden Historia – the First Female Employees of the Museums in Zagreb is the result of interdisciplinary cooperation between the Archaeological Museum in Zagreb, the Ethnographic Museum, the Museum of Arts and Crafts, and the Croatian School Museum. The research attempted to reconstruct the professional paths and contributions of the first female employees of Zagreb museums, as well as to point out the marginalized role of women in museum institutions in the interwar period. An important source was archival material and museum documentation. Critical and contextual reading of these sources, examining not only what was recorded, but also what was systematically omitted, provided insight into institutional hierarchies, value systems, and the gender division of labor in museums.*

**Keywords:** exhibition, museums, Zagreb, interwar period, professionalization of women's work, gender history, museum documentation, archival material

## INTRODUCTION

The role of women in the history of cultural institutions in Croatia, especially museums, has been marginalized within the dominant historiography for a long time. Although women in the interwar period (1918-1941) increasingly entered educational institutions and professional life, their contributions in the fields of museology, ethnology, art history, restoration, and cultural administration were rarely documented and even less frequently valued.

A key prerequisite for women to enter the museum professions was their education. From the end of the 19th century, women gradually gained the right to secondary, and then university education, first at faculties of teacher education and faculties of humanities and social sciences, and then at the newly opened technical and medical faculties, and art academies. By the early

1940s, the number of female students at the University of Zagreb accounted for almost a quarter of the total student population. Educated women were most often prepared and competent for pedagogical and scientific work, but they still faced gender barriers in the labor market. Despite formal legal opportunities, in practice women were faced with limited access to certain professions, institutional resistance, and social expectations that encouraged them to return to the private sphere. However, it was educated women who, through museum work, created new interpretations of cultural heritage, shaped museum practice, and introduced a female perspective into the dominantly male space of the profession.

The text presents the project *Hidden Historia – the First Female Employees of the Museums in Zagreb*, the result of interdisciplinary cooperation between the Archaeological Museum in Zagreb, the Ethnographic Museum, the Croatian School Museum, and the Museum of Arts and Crafts,<sup>1</sup> seeking to correct this multiple institutional and cultural injustice. The project presents women who, despite legal, social, and institutional barriers, managed to achieve a professional career in museum institutions. Their work was at the same time professional, innovative and personal, and their contribution raises the question of the visibility of women's work in cultural memory. The authors of the exhibition are Štefka Batinić, Aida Brenko, Andrea Klobučar, Ana Solter and Aleksandra Vlatković. The exhibition *Hidden Historia – the First Female Employees of the Museums in Zagreb* was held from March 6 to July 13, 2025, and then as an adapted traveling exhibition in other museums. The concept of the exhibition allowed each host to add a story about their female employees in Croatia and the region. An accompanying catalogue was also published in Croatian and English, which, in addition to the texts of the exhibition's authors, contained texts by Ida Ograjšek Gorenjak, Jelena Seferović and Leonida Kovač.<sup>2</sup>

The aim of the exhibition was to analyze the position, activities and legacy of the first women employed in the aforementioned Zagreb museums in the interwar period, with special emphasis on their educational background and professional paths. The methodology includes the analysis of archival sources, biographical data, and the social context in which the women worked. This project seeks to contribute to a broader understanding of the history of women in cultural institutions and to highlight the importance of integrating a gender perspective into contemporary museology and museum practice. The focus was the issue of visibility and recognition of women's work in the museum system, systematically marginalized in the interwar period, and not only their professional and scientific work but also their name. In this context, the research was not only focused on identifying the first female employees, but also sought to reconstruct their professional biographies through the analysis and interpretation of data on working conditions, responsibilities and institutional frameworks in order to (re)valorize their position in relation to official narratives.

- 1 Inter-museum cooperation was achieved at all levels of the project, from the realization of the exhibition to educational programs, marketing and public relations, also involving numerous external associates. The exhibition was enriched with multimedia installations and a diverse accompanying program (expert guides, lectures, workshops, concert, Zagreb Light Festival, etc.). The graphic designs for the exhibition and catalogue were created by NJI3 (Dina Milovčić and Franka Tretinjak), Dora Bilandžić and Ema Božek, the exhibition set-up was designed by NJI3 (Dina Milovčić and Franka Tretinjak) and Clinica studio (Ozana Ursić and Vedran Kasap), and the video was made by Ana Hušman, Ivan Marušić Klif (production and realization), Štefka Batinić and Ana Solter (research and text), Nina Violić (narration) and Hrvoje Nikšić (sound).
- 2 The exhibition and catalogue title (Solter, ed. 2025) is translated into English as *Hidden Historia*. The terms "hidden", "forgotten" and "invisible" women are used by Sheila Rowbotham in *Hidden from history: Three hundred years of women's oppression and the fight against it* (Rowbotham 1973).

## CONTEXT AND REASONS FOR THE EXHIBITION *HIDDEN HISTORIA*

The *Hidden Historia* project arose from the need to shed light on neglected aspects of women's history and their contributions in a specific professional environment – Zagreb museums during the interwar period – and to return these contributions to collective memory (cf. Crane 1997: 1372-1385). This topic was chosen to fill a gap in understanding the history of women's work, with a particular focus on intellectual and cultural professions.<sup>3</sup> Museums shape social narratives by selecting what to display, but also by what they omit, a process that has historically sidelined women and their contributions to culture (cf. Clover 2020: 116-118).

The interwar period in Croatia and the Kingdom of Yugoslavia was marked by significant social changes. The public discourse on the “modern woman” was ambivalent: on the one hand, her engagement, education and activity were encouraged, while on the other hand, traditional roles related to family and home continued to dominate (cf. Ograjšek Gorenjak 2019: 235-265, 2025: 8-27; cf. Feldman 2004: 235-246). The project explores how this ambivalence reflected on women's professional lives, in particular in the cultural sector. Despite the increase in the number of educated women entering the labor market, the contributions of women in many professions were often marginalized or insufficiently documented. In museums, women performed key jobs, but their roles were often formally undervalued or not adequately recognized in official records, so the project seeks to reconstruct these “hidden” histories.

Choosing the Archaeological Museum in Zagreb, the Ethnographic Museum, the Croatian School Museum, and the Museum of Arts and Crafts as the focus of the research allows for an in-depth insight into institutions that were crucial for the preservation of cultural heritage and the only museums in Zagreb in the interwar period that employed women. Museums are viewed not only as spaces of culture, but also as important social history archives, where the analysis of museum documentation and archival materials allows the reconstruction of the role and contribution of women who were often invisible in official records although they actively participated in their work, from curators and restorers to educators and administrative staff (Brown and Mairesse 2018: 531-534).

The *Hidden Historia* project not only uncovers neglected history, but also contributes to a broader reflection on the role of museums as guardians of collective memory, with the aim of opening a space for reflection on the position of women in cultural institutions today and emphasizing the importance of continuous self-reflection on the museum profession and its ability to recognize and appreciate all parts of social history (cf. Black 2011: 415-427).

Through all these aspects, the project seeks to emphasize the irreplaceable contributions of women to the development of Zagreb museums and to enrich our understanding of cultural history.

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3 In 2001, an entire issue of the journal *Informatica museologica* was dedicated to the topic of women and museums (Dražin-Trbuljak, ed. 2001), however, very little content was dedicated to the first female curators (Peić Čaldarović 2001: 12-17). In the collection of papers *Osnivači i prvi kustosi muzeja u Hrvatskoj (Founders and First Curators of Museums in Croatia)* (Radić, ed. 1999), there is no mention of women until after the Second World War, and the title itself suggests a dominant historiography.



Figure 1. Screening of the film *Histo(e)rija zaborava*, by Ana Hušman and Ivan Klif Marušić, shown on the facade of the Archaeological Museum in Zagreb as part of the *Festival of Light* (photo by Ana Solter, March 18, 2025)

## RESEARCHING THE *HIDDEN HISTORIA*

The exhibition *Hidden Historia* is based on an interdisciplinary approach that brings together gender studies, cultural history, museology and labor history. Key concepts that shape the analytical framework include the notions of invisible labor, institutional forgetting and gender (in)equality in culture. The starting point is an understanding of the complex socio-political, economic and cultural context of the interwar Kingdom of Yugoslavia, particularly Croatia, in order to shed light on the conditions of women's activities and struggle for their place in the professional world, especially in cultural institutions such as museums.

The theoretical framework of the *Hidden Historia* project enables a comprehensive analysis that goes beyond a mere enumeration of facts, providing deeper insight into the complex interactions between women's individual destinies and broader social, economic, and political forces (cf. Bergsdóttir 2016: 126-139). Key components of the research encompass the position of women in the interwar period, analyzing the social transformations, legal frameworks and cultural prejudices that affected women. Legal restrictions, such as those related to marriage, which directly affected women's employment in the public sector and their careers, are also discussed. Furthermore, gender roles and stereotypes are explored, looking into how cultural prejudices have shaped the professional destiny of women in museums, which often resulted in marginalized roles, but at the same time pointed to their irreplaceable contributions, including

the analysis of the wage gap and the struggle for equal working conditions. The history of work and professionalization is also explored, encompassing the process of professionalization of women in historically male-dominated occupations and the challenges they faced when entering the labor market, considering the economic crisis and its impact on women's employment and public pressure to cede jobs to men. Finally, the project also explores the impact of educational opportunities on women's professional paths, given the significant increase in the number of educated women in this period.

Research methods and availability of sources vary – literature, archives, museums, private legacies and interviews can be sources, but researchers often face problems such as insufficient research, fragmentation of material and insufficient documentation of female employees. In addition to literature on the history of museums, literature on women artists, exhibition catalogues and newspaper articles of the time were also important sources. However, it is very difficult to reconstruct a person's life using only the above sources, especially in the absence of written traces that would testify to their personal experiences, attitudes, thoughts, desires, or decisions. Subjective perspectives are rarely preserved, most often in petitions or responses to letters from superiors. This makes the rare writings of the protagonists even more valuable, primarily the memoirs of Antonija Tkalčić and the unpublished autobiographical novel by Dora Pfanova. In the absence of records that bring personal experiences, the endeavors were made to obtain data through semi-structured interviews with the protagonists' relatives or texts that some of the family members wrote about them.

The understanding of the theoretical framework of the *Hidden Historia* project is further expanded by insight into museum documentation as a source in the research of women's work. Reconstructing the contribution of the first female employees to the daily museum operations often requires the analysis of documentation that does not name them directly. Therefore, the analysis of inventory books, returns, minutes, registers and other documents, including the analysis of manuscripts, has become crucial for the reconstruction of the formal and real position of women in museums, and the results of such analysis are also presented in the exhibition. The biographical method was also used to reconstruct the professional paths of women employed in Zagreb museums, as well as a comparative analysis of educational and working conditions in the context of the interwar Kingdom of Yugoslavia. This includes an examination of the legal entanglements that resulted in different rights for women depending on their place of birth and religion, and the impact of the principle of paternal/husbandly authority on labor and social legislation.

The research is based on a selection of representative cases of women who worked as curators, restorers, educators and administrative staff in four Zagreb museums: Archaeological Museum in Zagreb, Ethnographic Museum, Croatian School Museum and Museum of Arts and Crafts. An analysis of available statistical data on women's education and their participation in the labor force in the cultural sector during the 1920s and 1930s was also conducted, with a special emphasis on the trend of increasing the number of employed women, with short periods of stagnation after World War I and during the Great Depression, and public pressure to cede jobs to men. This methodology provides an in-depth insight into the often-marginalized roles, but also the irreplaceable contributions of women to the development of Zagreb museums.



Figure 2. The “white room” display, dedicated to the theme of misogyny and hysteria (photo by Ema Kosnica, March 8, 2025)

## HISTORIA/HYSTERIA

The play on words “historia/hysteria” is strongly implied and permeates the exhibition *Hidden Historia – the First Female Employees of the Museums in Zagreb*, serving as a sharp critique and commentary on the historical treatment of women. The exhibition, especially through the concept of the “white room”, directly addresses the misogyny of highly positioned Croatian intellectuals of the last century (influenced by works such as those by Otto Weinger). The quotes presented in this part of the exhibition, created under the influence of these about the inferiority of women, often described women as “mentally unstable” or “seriously mentally ill”, which was historically a way of discrediting and marginalizing women who did not fit into patriarchal norms or were progressive. This treatment of women in Croatian museum institutions was not a silent, historically hidden act of superior men, but evidence of the tacit tendency of the cultural and social elite of the time to publicly humiliate women of progressive thinking. In specific cases of female employees, such as Dora Pfanova<sup>4</sup>, we can see how accusations of her “incapacity” were based on the personal assessments of her superior, Viktor Hoffiller<sup>5</sup>, who had no medical expertise. He not only discredited her professionally, but also portrayed her as mentally ill, using

4 Dora Pfanova (1897-1989) worked at the Archaeological Museum in Zagreb from 1931 to 1933 (cf. Solter and Seferović 2025: 125-127).

5 Viktor Hoffiller was the director of the Archaeological Museum in Zagreb from 1924 to 1951, with a short break from 1943 to 1945.

Figure 3. The view from the “white room” towards the beginning of the exhibition shows the symbolic transition between pink and white – a guide to the closing of the exhibition (photo by Ema Kosnica, July 9, 2025)



terminology that was common in medical records at the time, but in his case was clearly instrumentalized to degrade her status. Throughout medical and social discourses, “hysteria” was a diagnosis that stifled women’s ambitions and dissent, often used as a pretext for their exclusion from public and professional life (cf. Smith-Rosenberg 1972: 652-678).

The exhibition uses these historical quotes as “ironic relief”, turning the accusation of “hysteria” onto the very actors who made it. It indicates “hysteria” in the sense of irrational resistance to progressive ideas and fear of the emancipation of women within historical (male) intellectual circles. The play on words “historia/hysteria” thus emphasizes how “hysteria” was a construct within “historia” used to control women, while at the same time criticizing the “hysterical” resistance of patriarchal society to women’s emancipation. The exhibition *Hidden Historia* seeks to expose this “hysterical” side of history that led to the concealment of the contributions of many women.

## THE CASE OF HIDING

In the *Hidden Historia* project, the “case of hiding” primarily refers to the systematic silencing and marginalization of women’s contributions in the museum profession by the patriarchal intellectual circles and institutional power in the interwar period (cf. Hill 2016: 17-46). Curators and other experts were not hidden passively, but through active methods of degradation and disparagement. Hiding was not accidental, but was the result of conscious mechanisms and tacit tendencies of the cultural and social elite of the time. Today’s research confirms this, pointing

out the deliberate exclusion of women's documentation from archival holdings. The absence of women's voices in the archives becomes a political act of invalidating their contributions.

After the World War II, the "case of hiding" took on a new, more complex dimension with ideological shifts. The example of Marijana Gušić<sup>6</sup>, who took over the leadership of the Ethnographic Museum in 1946, shows that marginalization did not come exclusively from male colleagues. Marijana Gušić, aligning the Museum's policy with the new ideology, actively devalued the professional contribution of her predecessors, showing professional arrogance in relation to them. Despite her expertise and exceptional technical skills, Tereza Paulić<sup>7</sup> was discredited as ideologically unsuitable for leadership positions and reduced to a "living inventory". Similarly, Gušić saw Zdenka Sertić<sup>8</sup>, the curator at the time, primarily as a "painter" and exhibition worker, proposing her transfer from the museum's main scientific activity to the Institute of Folk Art. The arrival of women in positions of power, such as Marijana Gušić, did not necessarily mean the end of the marginalization of their predecessors, but often brought a new dynamic of devaluation, adapted to new ideological and professional circumstances.

Therefore, the "case of hiding" manifests itself through multiple mechanisms: from ideologically motivated disparagement and active professional discrediting by the male-dominated elite in the interwar period, to the reinterpretation and devaluation of the contributions of their predecessors by a new generation, mostly women, who operated within the changed political and professional frameworks of the post-war period.

### *HYSTERIA OF PINK*<sup>9</sup>

The exhibition *Hidden Historia* uses the color pink as a key visual and symbolic element, challenging traditional gender stereotypes while simultaneously affirming the presence of women in museum institutions that have systematically marginalized them. The color pink in light and graphic elements gradually fades, symbolizing hiding and hysteria, until it becomes completely white, which dominates the central room dedicated to hysteria (cf. Lazarin 2025). Traditionally stereotyped as a symbol of femininity, this color has long been socially conditioned to denote gentleness, passivity, and belonging to the female gender (cf. Paoletti 2012: 85-99). However, in contemporary feminist movements, pink has experienced a significant transformation and has become a powerful tool of subversion and resistance to gender norms.<sup>10</sup> This transition of pink from passive to active symbolism illustrates how feminist discourse takes over and redefines traditional labels in order to expand the space for expressing women's power and experiences. Also, in feminist art and museology, pink is used as a visual language that emphasizes gender issues, enabling the deconstruction of patriarchal narratives and the affirmation of women's contributions (cf. Clover, Taber and Sanford 2018: 11-28). However, it is important to point out that there is

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6 Marijana Gušić was the director of the Ethnographic Museum from 1946 to 1964.

7 Tereza Paulić (1887-1971) worked at the Ethnographic Museum from 1923 to 1948 (cf. Brenko and Vlatković 2025: 87).

8 Zdenka Sertić (1899-1986) worked at the Ethnographic Museum from 1921 to 1959 (cf. Brenko and Vlatković 2025: 85).

9 The title of this section is taken from the title of Lana Pukanić's lecture, held as part of the exhibition on May 8, 2025.

10 For example, within the *Women's March* 2017 protest, the pink "pussy hat" symbolized the solidarity and visibility of women in the fight against gender inequality and misogyny.

also a critical view of the overreliance on pink, as it can potentially reproduce gender stereotypes (cf. Topić 2025). Despite this, pink remains a powerful symbol in feminist practice, reflecting the complexity and dynamism of struggle for gender equality.

## SOURCES OF WOMEN'S PROFESSIONAL WORK IN MUSEUMS – ARCHIVAL MATERIAL AND MUSEUM DOCUMENTATION

In order to reconstruct professional biographies and shed light on the roles, contributions and positions of the first female employees of Zagreb museums, one of the main sources used in the research was archival material stored in museums, related institutions and private collections, as well as museum documentation.<sup>11</sup> Previous research into the history of museum institutions, based on the aforementioned sources, has focused mainly on the curator achievements and management, i.e. positions that were most often held by men. Baeza Ruiz emphasizes that museum archives are not neutral, but are products of institutional decisions, and these decisions can be deeply gendered. Available archival material often shapes the gender perspective and balance of historiography; therefore, it is necessary to critically examine their construction (cf. Baeza Ruiz 2018: 174-187).

Although these sources contain numerous traces of the presence and work of women in museums, interpretation from the perspective of gender history has remained underrepresented. The research conducted as part of the exhibition project *Hidden Historia* sought to supplement this aspect and make visible the positions, roles, and contributions of the first female employees of Zagreb museums within the framework of institutional history.

In the first decades of museum institutions, despite their education and expertise, women were formally limited to auxiliary positions performing jobs that were traditionally considered “women’s”, such as administration, taking care of textile collections, creating art documentation, etc. (cf. Peić Čaldarović 2001: 13-14). Very often, their work was not recorded in official narratives, which diminished their real role, primarily in the context of the professional tasks they performed. Therefore, in order to interpret women’s work, it was necessary to focus on what was not directly stated, but nevertheless remained recorded and can be read from museum documentation and archival materials (cf. Rajh 2023: 186-187).

The most used archival material in the research was the personal files of female employees containing documents such as employee records, performance reports, personnel files, letters, certificates, applications for employment or promotion, medical opinions, etc. In addition, minutes, letters from directors, and other administrative documents were also used. The analysis of this material, along with insight into personal data, education, professional interests, types of jobs and responsibilities, as well as working conditions, allows the understanding of the relationship within the institution towards female employees, their work and status. It also provides a broader institutional context based on documents recording the systematization of job positions, describing the required qualifications, budget proposals, and other aspects of the museum’s internal organization.

An important source for identifying and analyzing the professional contribution of the first female museum employees was museum documentation, primarily inventory books, various

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11 The research used archival material stored in the Archaeological Museum in Zagreb, the Ethnographic Museum, the Croatian School Museum, the Museum of Arts and Crafts, the Croatian State Archives, the Fine Arts Archives, and private collections.



Figure 4. A view of two rooms of the exhibition display showing the professional trajectories of the first women employed in Zagreb museums, taken on International Women's Day when a free visit to the exhibition was organized (photo by Ema Kosnica, March 8, 2025)

records of museum objects, vignettes, card files, documentation drawings, and photographs. A methodological challenge was the fact that in the early stages of documenting museum materials, female employees often remained completely anonymous or were recorded only by their initials, which is especially evident in the documentation drawings. These drawings are particularly important in archaeology, but the first female employees of the Archaeological Museum in Zagreb, Antonija Tkalčić<sup>12</sup> and Roksana Zurunić Cuvaj<sup>13</sup>, employed as museum draftswomen, remained unsigned, or signed with their initials (cf. Solter and Seferović 2025: 116, 131). However, a detailed analysis of museum documentation, primarily manuscripts and entry elements, along with the temporal relationship of the employment of the first female employees, supported by fragmentary data on their responsibilities, allowed the attribution of individual segments of documents to specific individuals.

The analysis of museum documentation and archival material found that the first female museum employees, although recorded in archival sources as auxiliary staff, performed numerous professional tasks that today we consider curatorial, and were key in the creation and development of museum practices, but their contribution remained mostly unrecognized and marginalized. On the other hand, some of the first female employees in museums were overqualified for the jobs they performed, which was a systematic degradation. Research into their roles and positions has shown that neither archival materials nor museum documentation are neutral sources, but rather reflect institutional hierarchies, value systems, and the gendered division of labor. Critical and contextual reading allows us to perceive not only what was recorded, but also what was systematically omitted. It is precisely such an approach that opens up space for writing an alternative history of museums, one that deconstructs the previous notions about the beginnings of museum activity in Croatia, in which invisible women's work is finally recognized as a key and indispensable part of institutional memory. In that sense, the exhibition *Hidden Historia* is an attempt not only to correct, but also to call for a new evaluation of archival material as testimony to gender dynamics, hierarchies of power, and the struggle for the professional visibility of women within cultural institutions.

## CASE STUDY: THE FIRST FEMALE EMPLOYEES OF THE MUSEUMS IN ZAGREB

In the period between the two world wars, Zagreb museums employed women to perform professional jobs, and among the pioneers we find women with degrees from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, the Academy of Fine Arts, or Faculty of Teacher Education, who worked as curators, museum draftswomen, or as experts in textiles, ceramics, and education. As the examples of Roksana Zurunić Cuvaj or Zdenka Sertić prove, these were educated women who often worked in multiple domains – scientific, pedagogical and creative. Despite their professional qualifications, their jobs were often insecure, poorly paid, with limited institutional recognition. Some female employees, although they were crucially involved in the development of museum collections and concepts, remained recorded in historical archives only as administrative staff or as “assistants.” Their contribution to exhibitions, restoration projects, or visitor

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12 Antonija Tkalčić (1891-1981) worked at the Archaeological Museum in Zagreb from 1924 to 1928 (cf. Solter and Seferović 2025: 120-121).

13 Roksana Zurunić Cuvaj (1902-1993) worked at the Archaeological Museum in Zagreb from 1931 to 1935 (cf. Solter and Seferović 2025: 131).

education remained marginalized. In all museums, it is evident that women worked despite structural obstacles: lower salaries, insecure contracts, limited opportunities for advancement, but also expectations that their careers would end with marriage. Yet, it was precisely their work that enabled contemporary museums to build the foundations of professional work as we know it today.

In the context of the *Hidden Historia* project, the case study focuses on illustrating the specific professional trajectories of women in Zagreb museums in the interwar period, emphasizing their contributions and the challenges they faced. Individual examples clarify how the applied methodology enabled the reconstruction of “invisible” histories.

Zlata Šufflay (1873-1956) spent almost two decades at the Museum of Arts and Crafts, working on documentation, cataloguing and classification of the material. She devoted special attention to the processing of the textile collection, especially lace – objects whose symbolic and gender connotations often led to the marginalization of women’s work in museums. Lace, traditionally perceived as a “feminine object”, was simultaneously the subject of professional expertise and institutional undervaluation. Zlata Šufflay, although she systematically and expertly processed this material for years, never formally advanced nor was her museum work publicly recognized, and she completely disappeared from museum history. Her case illustrates the patterns of invisibility of women’s work: women were crucial to the daily operations of museums, but remained outside historiography and institutional memory.<sup>14</sup>

The case study of poet Dora Pfanova (1897-1989) provides a deep insight into the challenges women faced in the professional world of the interwar period, especially when their interests and education deviated from conventional norms. Despite her higher education, Dora Pfanova faced prejudice because of her literary work and unconventional interests, including meditation and mysticism. She was employed at the Archaeological Museum against the director’s recommendation, with a salary that did not match her qualifications. She was harassed by director Viktor Hoffiller and curator Josip Klemenc<sup>15</sup>, who considered her work inadequate and made inappropriate comments about her mental health. This treatment, which would today be recognized as mobbing, manifested itself in assigning her exclusively administrative tasks and insisting on detailed reports. Finally, in 1933, she was dismissed under a paragraph that allowed for the free dismissal of employees based on the personal judgment of the director.<sup>16</sup>

In the context of the *Hidden Historia* project, the study of the case of Jelica Belović-Bernadzikowska (1870-1946), a prominent ethnologist and writer, provides an insight into the challenges and contributions of women in the museum profession from the turn of the 19th to the 20th century and in the interwar period. Her professional path illustrates how women, despite the obstacles, left a significant mark in the development of cultural institutions. Jelica Belović-Bernadzikowska was known for her role in editing the ethnographic collections of the Trade and Crafts Museum (precursor of the Ethnographic Museum) and the State Arts and Crafts Museum (today’s Museum of Arts and Crafts). She created crucial catalogs, including the *Catalogue of the Croatian Folklore Collection* (vol. I, 1906.; vol. II, 1910.) and *Catalogue of the textile collection* (1907). However, despite her significant qualifications and work in the field of ethnology,

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14 For more on Zlata Šufflay, see: Klobučar 2025: 50-77.

15 Josip Klemenc was the curator of the Archaeological Museum in Zagreb, where he worked from 1922 to 1942.

16 For more on Dora Pfanova, see: Solter and Seferović 2025: 122-127.

ethnography and folklore studies, the Zagreb museums did not offer her employment when new staff were needed. In a letter to Vladimir Tkalčić<sup>17</sup> in 1920, Jelica Belović-Bernadzikowska expressed her resentment because there was no place for her and because the Museum did not appreciate her ethnological and ethnographic work. Her work and high qualifications may even have disqualified her for the job, since the Museum was looking for a manipulator, and her experience and qualifications as a teacher were suitable for a higher position (Brenko and Vlatković 2025: 80). This case is a clear example of the obstacles faced by highly educated women in the museum sector where they were sometimes considered “overqualified” for the available positions.<sup>18</sup>

These examples from the catalogue illustrate the challenges and contributions of women in the museum profession and confirm the need for detailed analysis of museum documentation and biographical data in order to reconstruct the “invisible” histories of women.

## (RE)VALORIZATION OF WORK THROUGH THE ANALYSIS OF MUSEUM DOCUMENTATION AND ARCHIVAL MATERIAL – AN EXAMPLE OF RESEARCH OF TEREZA PAULIĆ

The analysis of museum documentation and archival material carried out as part of the exhibition project *Hidden Historia* allowed a comprehensive interpretation of the work of Tereza Paulić (1887-1971). Tereza Paulić worked continuously at the Ethnographic Museum from September 13, 1923 until her retirement on December 4, 1948. She was employed as a teacher at women's vocational schools, and over the years she advanced in positions from museum clerk, textile expert, and textile restorer to curator. Although in the literature and collective memory of the Museum she is remembered primarily as a textile expert, responsible for the protection, conservation, and restoration of objects, the results of the research have shown that her contribution was much broader.<sup>19</sup> A systematic analysis of archival material and museum documentation, primarily inventory books, inventory cards, field notebooks and photographs, sought to (re) value the role of Tereza Paulić, crucial in almost all segments of museum activity.

An insight into her personal file provides us with information on her education. After graduating from the Girls' High School in Zagreb (1898-1902) and taking practical courses at the Royal State Women's Vocational School in Zagreb (1902-1915), she attended the painting department of the Royal Academy of Arts and Crafts (1916-1920), and then continued her education abroad. Information about her education and the breadth of her work in the field of art available in the archival material opened up another perspective of her work as an artist that had not been present in the memory of the Ethnographic Museum.<sup>20</sup> Tereza Paulić's artistic work was further researched through the analysis of archival sources, catalogues of exhibitions in which she participated, newspaper articles and professional literature. The breadth of her competences and activities is illustrated by a letter from 1927 by Vladimir Tkalčić, the then director of the Museum, in which he states:

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17 Vladimir Tkalčić was the first curator of the Museum (from 1919), and then the director from 1925 to 1934.

18 For more on Jelica Belović-Bernadzikowska, see: Batinić 2025: 28-49, Kovač 2025: 146-169.

19 For more on aspects of her work on the protection of museum holdings, see the text by M. Grčević in this issue of *Ethnological Research*.

20 Tereza Paulić's works in the field of applied art are kept in the holdings of the Museum of Arts and Crafts, which once again confirms the connection between institutions and people of that time.

“Practical and theoretical knowledge of all textile techniques, combined with a refined artistic understanding, particularly qualified her for that part of the museum collection that makes up the largest part of the museum holdings in quantitative and qualitative terms. However, not only her work in the museum but also her activities outside of it, especially at various art and craft exhibitions, as well as various private commissions related to the textile profession, testify to her abilities, which she acquired not so much through formal education, but rather through independent improvement of her talent and knowledge.”<sup>21</sup>

At the Museum, she performed all professional tasks: maintaining museum documentation, inventorying and professional processing of objects, completing the museum holdings and systematizing museum materials, conserving and restoring objects, preparing and designing exhibitions, field research and collaborating with local communities. An examination of the inventory books revealed that she was signed as the inventory manager, which was also confirmed by data contained in the archive material stored in the Museum. Given that she had a very specific handwriting, available in her field notebooks, it was possible to conduct the handwriting analysis of the museum documentation and find that, in addition to the inventory book, she also kept records of acquired and donated materials, as well as records of donors. It was also possible to determine the number intervals and records in the inventory book and inventory cards, where she described the museum objects in detail and expertly. In accordance with the then modern approach, she additionally enriched the inventory cards with drawings and sketches of objects or their characteristic motifs.<sup>22</sup>

A particularly significant segment of her work is the precise and detailed keeping of field notebooks. The structure and content of her notes demonstrate expertise and methodological precision. In her notes, she regularly lists the names of the informants, the place and time of the research, and along with detailed descriptions of the researched topics, she systematically records local names, which also indicates her involvement in the creation of the *Dictionary of Women's Handicrafts*, preserved in the Museum in the form of a card file (cf. Vlatković 2025: 23-36).

She often illustrated the data in her field notebooks, and her field photographs are also stored in the Museum's documentation. According to the data from the field notebooks and data from other archival sources, she did researches in almost all parts of Croatia and in part of Bosnia and Herzegovina. A special place in her field research, but also in other aspects of professional museum work, belongs to Vrbnik on the island of Krk, where she was personally and professionally connected to the local community, which still remembers her.

Through field research and cooperation with the local community, she also acquired objects for the museum's holdings, although this segment of her work, as in the case of her contemporaries, is only sporadically mentioned in the Museum. Museum documentation, especially in the first years of the Museum's operation, very rarely provides information about her role in collecting. However, work on this project and research into museum documentation and archival material using the example of Tereza Paulić, but also Jela Novak<sup>23</sup> and Zdenka Sertić, confirmed that

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21 EMZ Archives, personal file of Tereza Paulić, 214/1927.

22 Although the drawings on the inventory cards are not signed and it is difficult to determine which ones could be attributed to Tereza Paulić and which to Zdenka Sertić, the artwork and information about her assignments confirm that Tereza Paulić was making the drawings on the inventory cards.

23 Jela Novak (1873-1945) worked at the Ethnographic Museum from 1919 to 1932 (cf. Brenko and Vlatković 2025: 83).

their role in collecting museum objects and supplementing the museum holdings can be at least partially determined by analyzing and comparing data from the inventory book with archival material and documentation related to field research.

In the case of Tereza Paulić, the research conducted indicates a disproportion between her formal status and the memory of her as a textile expert in relation to the actual scope and significance of her contribution. This was probably also influenced by the attitude of individual directors, whose opinions played a significant role in shaping institutional memory. While director Vladimir Tkalčić emphasized her expertise in his requests for her promotion, the memory of her was obviously marked by the opinions of later directors Ivo Franić<sup>24</sup> and director Marijana Gušić, who downplayed her expertise and competence.

The presented example of research into the role and contributions of Tereza Paulić highlights the importance of museum documentation and archival material as sources for (re)interpretation of the contribution of experts in museums. This methodological approach, which can serve as a model for future research into professional biographies, points to the need for systematic and detailed analyses that allow new readings of museum history.

## CONCLUSION

The project *Hidden Historia – the First Female Employees of the Museums in Zagreb* represents a significant contribution to contemporary museological and historiographical research through a critical examination of the institutional history of Zagreb museums from a gender perspective. The research has shown that women in the interwar period (1918-1941) played a far more complex and important role in the development of museum institutions than has been recognized in official historiography. The analysis of archival material and biographical data of women employed in the Archaeological Museum, the Ethnographic Museum, the Museum of Arts and Crafts, and the Croatian School Museum reveals three key aspects of their work.

Women like Tereza Paulić, Zdenka Sertić and Jela Novak were not just administrative staff, but experts who actively shaped museum practice. Their work on collecting, protecting, and interpreting cultural heritage was fundamental to the functioning of the institutions. Despite professional qualifications and significant contributions, women faced institutionalized discrimination – lower salaries, insecure contracts, limited opportunities for advancement and the expectations that their careers would end with marriage. The case of Dora Pfanova illustrates how prejudice could escalate into outright harassment. The lack of traditional museum exhibits prompted the development of new approaches to museum display where the document becomes both an exhibit and an interpretive medium, opening up space for the presentation of “invisible labor”.

This project goes beyond simply documenting hidden biographies. It demonstrates how a critical analysis of the institutional past can transform the understanding of museums as social spaces. By integrating a gender perspective into museum practice, the project points the way towards a more inclusive cultural history that recognizes the contributions of all social groups. The methodology developed in this research – a combination of archival work, a biographical approach, and innovative exhibition techniques – can be used as a model for future research

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24 Ivo Franić was the director of the Ethnographic Museum from 1935 to 1939.

on marginalized groups in cultural institutions. The *Hidden Historia* lays the foundation for further research that could encompass a broader time frame, other geographical areas, or different cultural institutions. It also raises questions about the contemporary position of women in museums and the need for continued self-reflection of the profession. Finally, this work affirms the role of museums not only as guardians of heritage, but also as spaces of social responsibility for questioning dominant narratives and giving voice to those whose stories have been silenced (Coffee 2008, Wong 2025). In this way, museums are affirmed as active participants in the creation of a more just and inclusive cultural memory.

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