

From Invisible Hands to Active Voices – Reinterpretation of Women’s Heritage in the Ethnographic Museum’s Projects

In 2023, 2024 and 2025, the Ethnographic Museum, in collaboration with the Center for Women’s Studies, implemented two projects that brought into focus the ways in which women’s experience, memory and heritage shape community and cultural identity. The exhibitions *Intimate Spaces of Everyday Life* and *Travelers* were the impetus and inspiration for designing and carrying out a series of activities that connected art, education, and the participation of museum visitors. The activities opened up space for reflection on home, intimacy, and everyday life, but also on travel and cultural exchanges, as well as for questioning the boundaries between the traditional and the contemporary. Starting from the idea that heritage is not only found in museum collections, but also in personal stories, emotions and memories, the two projects that will be presented in this text developed as places of encounter and dialogue between different experiences and voices. As part of artistic and educational activities, participants reinterpreted traditional motifs through creative expression, questioned gender patterns, and shaped their own narratives about space, identity and belonging. Below, we present an overview of the key activities and results of the project, which testify to the power of co-creation and the importance of preserving women’s heritage in a contemporary context.

THE PROJECT *WOMEN’S HERITAGE – INTIMATE SPACES AS A TESTIMONY OF THE COMMUNITY*

In 2023 and 2024, the Ethnographic Museum, in collaboration with the Center for Women’s Studies as the project leader, designed and implemented the *Women’s Heritage Project – Intimate Spaces as a Testimony of the Community*, focused on the heritage of women and their historical and contemporary role in shaping society. The authors of the project are Željka Jelavić, PhD, Anastazija Petrović and Silvia Vrsalović, Museum Educators. The inspiration for this project collaboration was the exhibition *Intimate Spaces of Everyday Life*, which, by displaying traditional objects from the Furniture Collection with contemporary artistic interpretations, questions the personal and social meanings of home, intimacy and everyday life, especially from the perspective of women. The exhibition additionally focuses on the relationship to space and objects in the context of migration, earthquakes, isolation and loss of home.



Figure 1. Participants of the creative writing workshop cycle with Katja Grcić in the exhibition *Intimate Spaces of Everyday Life*

As part of the project, two workshop cycles of creative writing and reinterpretation of wall hangings were held at the Ethnographic Museum, offering participants a space for expression, dialogue and joint reflection on heritage and identity. The creative writing cycle, led by Katja Grcić, an independent artist and playwright, took place in four meetings during November and December 2023. The workshops were preceded by a guided tour of the exhibition *Intimate Spaces of Everyday Life*, which opened up space for reflection on private, intimate and public spaces, with a focus on women's heritage (Figure 1). With the encouragement and suggestions of the facilitator, the participants were given the opportunity to develop their own authorial voice in the form of essays, short fictional stories, dramatic situations and poetry, articulating personal experiences and connecting them with the themes of home, everyday life and heritage. In this way, they became active participants in the creation of a contemporary cultural narrative that relies on women's experience and empowers voices that are often invisible.

The second workshop cycle, reinterpretation of wall hangings, was held in March 2024, also in four meetings. This cycle was also preceded by a guided tour through the exhibition *Intimate Spaces of Everyday Life*, but this time with an emphasis on wall hangings. Wall hangings (*cookbooks, wall cloths, embroidered cloths...*) are embroidered pieces of fabric that, in addition to



Figure 2. Participant in the wall cloth reinterpretation workshop

an artistic motif, also contain a short, often rhyming, text. They became popular in urban areas at the end of the 19th century, while they entered rural areas in the 1920s and 1930s. They were hung on the wall, usually in the kitchen, first as splatter guards during cooking, and later as decorations that conveyed various messages related to personal hygiene, healthy eating, etiquette, and the like, but most often love and male-female relationships. Rarely deviating from traditional values, women were mostly depicted through the prism of obedience, love, and family duty. This workshop cycle focused on a critical reading of wall hangings, pointing out the gender stereotypes depicted on them, their contemporary reinterpretation and women's empowerment (Figure 2). The first meeting was dedicated to creating empowering messages that reflect the contemporary needs and identities of women, while in the remaining meetings these messages were embroidered on cotton fabric. The workshops were led by independent artists Hana Lukas Midžić and Ivana Ognjanovac, who encouraged creativity, togetherness, and critical questioning of traditional patterns among the participants.

The project leader, the Center for Women's Studies, held two activities as part of this project – the game *Mysterious Letter* and the educational walk *The Ideals of a Revolutionary Woman*, conceptualized by Ana Zbiljski and Martina Findrik (Figure 3). The Mysterious Letter, a search



Figure 3. *The Ideals of a Revolutionary Woman* walk, led by Ana Zbiljski (Centre for Women's Studies)

game at locations around the city, was held four times during the project. The letters focused on women's heritage in Zagreb, namely locations in the city center associated with women from Croatia's past. The game was created by Martina Findrik, Đurđica Vitković, Martina Piškor and Neda Novosel. The walk titled *The Ideals of a Revolutionary Woman*, related to the life, work and legacy of Marija Jurić Zagorka in the Lower Town, took place twice. It was conceptualized by Ana Zbiljski, Neda Novosel, Martina Piškor and Đurđica Vitković.

The aim of this project was to reflect through participatory, educational and artistic forms on relationships to space, the contrast between the intimate and the public, and the legacy that women pass on through generations. Special emphasis was placed on women's experience and voice, which has often been marginalized or ignored in dominant historical narratives. The project provided a platform for women to express, connect and empower through creative processes, thereby contributing to strengthening their visibility and presence in the public space. The workshop participants were given the opportunity for personal growth, development of authentic expression, and articulation of their own experiences. Also, with this project, we wanted to increase the scope of publicly available, high-quality and culturally relevant content intended for citizens, with an emphasis on activating local communities and revitalizing the city's Lower



Figure 4. Work of a participant of the *Zagreb Drawings* workshop

and Upper Town through women's history and art. A total of 189 participants took part in these activities, confirming the interest and need for such content that combines culture, community, and gender equality.

THE PROJECT TRAVELERS – TRACES OF WOMEN IN TIME AND SPACE

The project *Travelers – Traces of Women in Time and Space* was also carried out in collaboration with the Center for Women's Studies, and the authors of the program are Anastazija Petrović and Silvia Vrsalović. The program was inspired by the exhibition *Travelers*, which displays and contextualizes objects from the Collection of Non-European Cultures and opens up broader topics such as the phenomenon of travel, colonialism, Eurocentrism and migration. The exhibition presents the most important donors of the Collection, and since most of the donors presented are men, this program places emphasis on the few women among them. The inspiring life stories and legacy of Milka Trnina, Katarina Carić, Zora Seljan and Renata Horvat were the starting point for the activities within this program. The program aims to valorize their role in society and in the context of the development of the Collection, as well as to raise the question of the

presence of women in public discourse. The program activities included a cycle of creative writing workshops in the form of travelogues, as well as photography and illustration workshops. An expert guide through the exhibition *Travelers* with an emphasis on the personal stories and journeys of travelers and donors to the Collection was the introduction to the workshops.

The creative writing workshops led by Dorotea Šušak, playwright, writer and director, were held during May and June 2025 as a cycle of four workshops. The participants explored the potential for transforming their relationship to the genre and the form of travelogue, and were encouraged to create a text that questions the conventional boundaries between autobiographical and fictional. The workshops were conceived as a space for reflecting on the relationship to rootedness in contrast to the need to travel and explore the world and oneself. The participants had the opportunity to explore their own life stories through a variety of creative tasks that encouraged them to think outside the box. Although the starting point was the travelogue, the workshops soon developed into deeper reflections on personal experiences, intertwining real and imaginary worlds. Some tasks resulted in realistic depictions of autobiographical experiences, while others required more abstract and imaginative approaches, opening up space for a multitude of interpretations. Each workshop was an opportunity to write, but also to read and comment on texts, developing active listening and critical thinking. Reading in front of the group allowed an exchange of perspectives and provided an incentive for further development of authorial expression and self-confidence in writing. Regardless of whether the participants created fictional stories or relied on their own experiences, the workshop provided space for personal and creative growth, exploration of the relationship to text and writing, and opening up to new ways of expressing and understanding oneself and others.

The illustration workshops *Zagreb Drawings* were led by Hana Lukas Midžić, an academic sculptor and illustrator, and an independent artist who participates in various programs of contemporary artistic and pedagogical practices. The workshops, arising from the thematic framework of the exhibition *Travelers*, were designed as a spatial and visual exploration of the city through drawing. The personal travelogues of the travelers featured in the exhibition also contain numerous illustrations that were a way of documenting, observing and reflecting during their travels. With this idea in mind, the illustration workshops took place to offer participants the opportunity to leave the museum and embark on a “journey” around their own city. By walking and sketching urban scenes, participants observed more carefully the everyday environment and visual elements of space that often go unnoticed (Figure 4). The workshops took place on two occasions, in May and September 2025. Fieldwork allowed participants to develop a specific authorial approach, recording the city in the form of a visual diary. The focus was on the process of observation and interpretation, rather than technical execution, encouraging openness of expression, freedom of drawing approach and consideration of illustration as a means of self-reflection.

The photography workshops entitled *Discovering the City Through the Lens* held in May, June and September 2025, were aimed at developing visual perception and reflecting on urban space through the medium of photography. The workshops were led by Ana Šesto, a photographer and journalist. Like other activities within the project, the photography workshops started in the exhibition space of the Ethnographic Museum. Photography often had an important documentary and personal function in the lives of the featured travelers. This particularly applies to Renata Horvat, who sailed around the world with her husband Joža Horvat, documenting their travels with her camera. Of the four women who were the inspiration for this project, she is the

only one not featured in the exhibition *Travelers*. After a short tour and discussion, the workshop moved to the surrounding city space, where participants, using cameras or mobile phones, observed and recorded the city from unexpected angles, trying to notice details and moments that otherwise go unnoticed. Practical tasks focused on framing techniques, observation of light, and the structure of visual narrative, with special emphasis on developing a personal authorial approach. The participants, like the travelers who inspired them, became explorers of their own environment, tourists in their own city, using photography as a means of discovery, recording and storytelling.

A total of seventy participants were involved in the workshops within the project, who were given the opportunity for personal and artistic development through the exploration of their own life stories and creative expression through writing, illustration and photography. This encourages deeper reflection on oneself and the world around, strengthens critical thinking and provides opportunities for the empowerment and visibility of women in public discourse.

We believe that the participatory projects *Women's Heritage – Intimate Spaces as a Testimony of the Community* and *Travelers – Traces of Women in Time and Space* have shaped a dynamic cultural framework in which women's experience has been recognized, valorized and reinterpreted in its multiple forms. Both projects have shown that women's heritage transcends the boundaries of museums and exhibition spaces – it lives in everyday experiences, journeys, objects and stories that testify to women's resilience, creativity and connection. Such projects prove that museums can be transformed from authoritative institutions into spaces of dialogue and creativity.