Exhibition „From Jakob Hlavka to Instrumentaria: One hundred and thirty years of medical instrument production in Zagreb“ Zagreb City Museum, 3 March – 26 April, 2026

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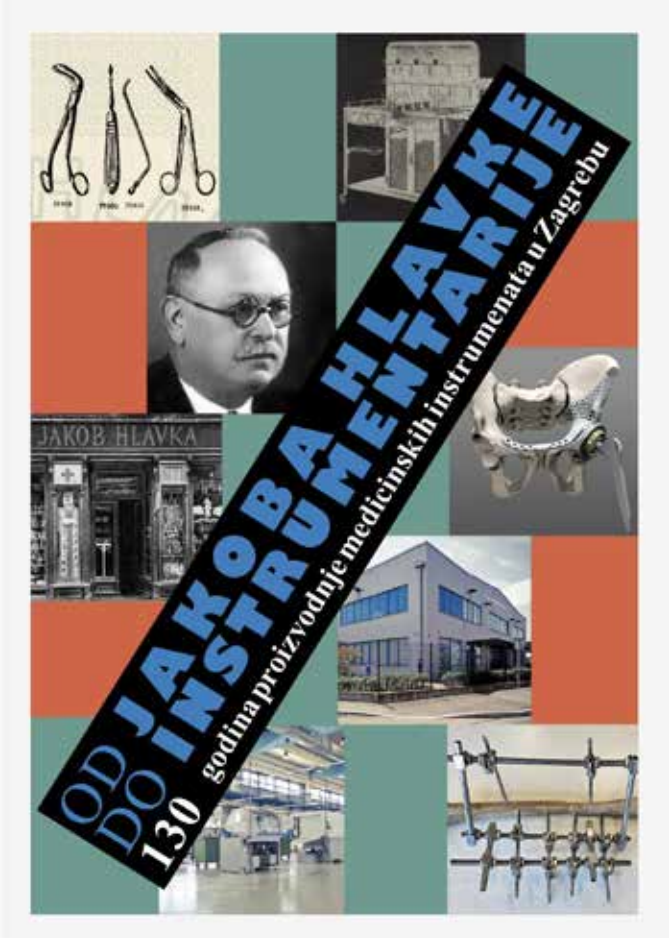
From Jakob Hlavka to Instrumentaria: One hundred and thirty years of medical instrument production in Zagreb is a valuable exhibition because it recovers from relative oblivion a major chapter in Croatian industrial, medical, and urban history. Rather than treating the history of medicine solely through physicians, hospitals, or scientific discoveries, the exhibition shifts attention toward the material infrastructures that made modern medical practice possible: instruments, devices, workshop knowledge, factory labour, entrepreneurial initiative, and the dense network linking medical professionals with local manufacturing. In doing so, it makes a compelling argument that the history of medical modernity in Croatia cannot be understood without the history of those who produced the tools of healing. This broader interpretative ambition is one of the exhibition's strongest features, as it places Jakob Hlavka and his factory within the intertwined histories of Zagreb's industrialisation, Croatian healthcare development, and the long durée of technological continuity that extends to the present-day company Instrumentaria.

A particular merit of the exhibition lies in its insistence on contextualisation. The accompanying catalogue does not isolate Hlavka as a singular entrepreneurial figure, but situates his activity within the wider framework of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Zagreb, a city undergoing accelerated urban, infrastructural, and institutional transformation. The narrative reconstructs the environment in which industrial growth, medical professionalisation, and urban modernisation proceeded in parallel: the development of transport, the rise of industrial zones, the establishment of healthcare institutions, and the gradual consolidation of scientific and technical expertise in the city. Within such a setting, Hlavka's arrival in Zagreb in 1896 appears not as an accidental biographical episode, but as a historically intelligible moment in which a skilled surgical mechanic recognised an unmet regional need and transformed it into a durable manufacturing enterprise.

The exhibition's treatment of Jakob Hlavka himself is equally persuasive. Born in 1869 near Plzeň, educated through apprenticeship and specialist training in Graz, Stuttgart, Vienna, Bonn, and Paris, Hlavka came to Zagreb equipped with technical expertise that was not yet institutionally rooted in Croatia. The exhibition shows convincingly that his workshop for the manufacture and repair of surgical instruments, opened in 1896, soon exceeded the scale of artisanal production and evolved into the first Croatian factory of medical instruments and equipment. Such a development positioned Hlavka as both a pioneer and mediator: he transferred Central European technical knowledge into the Zagreb milieu while simultaneously adapting production to local medical needs and building trust among Croatian physicians. The



1. The visual identity of the exhibition and the cover of the catalog From Jakob Hlavka to Instrumentaria, design: Ante Rašić

catalogue also rightly stresses that his success was not inevitable. Administrative obstruction, market uncertainty, and the difficulty of introducing a new industrial branch formed part of his early experience, making his eventual consolidation all the more historically significant.

One of the most important interpretative contributions of the exhibition is its demonstration that Hlavka's factory was not simply a place of manufacture, but a site of collaboration and co-production between industry and medicine. The catalogue documents the reconstruction of numerous instances in which Croatian physicians worked with Hlavka to design, adapt, or improve instruments, orthopaedic appliances, workstations, and other specialised devices. The exhibition thus restores visibility to a form of expertise that historiography has often marginalised: the skilled

intermediary work through which medical ideas become material instruments.

Another major strength of the project is its use of sources. The exhibition and catalogue draw on a wide spectrum of preserved documentation: family archives, business records, building permits, trade catalogues, memorial materials, advertisements, photographs, museum artefacts, and professional journals. This rich evidentiary base allows the authors to reconstruct not only the chronology of Hlavka's enterprise, but also its visual culture, spatial development, commercial strategies, and social embeddedness. Especially noteworthy is the use of catalogues and photographs to reconstruct the factory premises, shop interiors, production lines, and product range. Such materials help the exhibition move beyond abstract description and offer visitors a tangible sense of how medical industry was staged, marketed, and experienced. In that respect, the exhibition is not only about industrial history but also about the visual and documentary practices through which industrial legitimacy was built.

The temporal scope of the exhibition is equally impressive. It does not end with Jakob Hlavka's retirement or with the nationalisation of the factory after the Second World War, but follows the transformations of his legacy through socialist reorganisation, the emergence of Banija and Instrumentaria, post-socialist change, and contemporary medical manufacturing. It prevents the exhibition from becoming a nostalgic monument to a lost entrepreneurial past highlighting continuity within discontinuity. Even where political regimes changed, ownership structures were broken, or companies were reorganised, technical knowledge, production traditions, and institutional memory endured in new forms. In this sense, the exhibition offers a nuanced reflection on heritage: heritage is shown not simply as preservation of static objects, but as transmission, adaptation, and survival across radically different political and economic orders. This is one of the reasons why the exhibition resonates beyond the history of one factory; it becomes a case study in how industrial-medical knowledge persists despite rupture.



2. Participants in the opening of the exhibition From Jakob Hlavka to Instrumentaria, Zagreb City Museum, 3 March 2026 (photo documentation of the Zagreb City Museum)



3. Window of Jakob Hlavka's shop at Ilica 24, Photo Donegani, Zagreb, after 1938 (Croatian Museum of Medicine and Pharmacy, inv. no. HMMF-2343)



4. Public at the opening of the exhibition From Jakob Hlavka to Instrumentaria, Zagreb City Museum, 3 March 2026 (photo documentation of the Zagreb City Museum)

The reviewers' assessments included in the provided materials also underscore the exhibition's broader significance. Marijan Lipovac emphasises the importance of bringing the legacy of Czech immigrant entrepreneurs into the public history of Zagreb and Croatia, rightly arguing that Hlavka belongs among the notable figures who shaped Croatian industrial life and Croatian-Czech relations. He also points to the exhibition's value for understanding the social role of medical production, since Hlavka's factory influenced not only the institutional world of hospitals and surgeries but also the wider public through its products and long-term presence. Darko Antičević, in turn, highlights the interpretative richness of the catalogue, especially its ability to trace the company across 130 years, four states, and different political systems, thereby revealing the positive and negative pressures exerted by broader social forces on healthcare entrepreneurship and collective memory. Together, these assessments confirm that the exhibition succeeds on several levels at once: as industrial history, as history of medicine, as urban history, and as a reflection on memory and resilience.

Ultimately, *From Jakob Hlavka to Instrumentaria* stands out as an exemplary museum project because it brings into focus a field that is often overlooked: the history of manufacturing for medicine. Its achievement lies not only in documenting the biography of a remarkable entrepreneur, but in demonstrating how material production, clinical innovation, urban growth, and political change intersected in the making of modern healthcare in Croatia. By combining archival precision, visual documentation, and a strong interpretative framework, the exhibition restores agency to a forgotten industrial tradition and makes a persuasive case for its place within Croatian cultural heritage. It shows that medical instruments are never merely technical objects: they are products of knowledge, labour, ambition, and historical circumstance. In making that argument visible to a wider audience, the exhibition performs an important act of scholarly and public restitution.

Organizers: Croatian Museum of Medicine and Pharmacy, Division for History of Medical Sciences of the Institute for History and Philosophy of Science, CASA
Co-organizers: Instrumentaria d. d., Zagreb City Museum
Authors of the exhibition and catalogue: Silvija Brkić Midžić and Stella Fatović-Ferenčić, MD, PhD
Exhibition design, visual identity and graphic design of the catalogue: Ante Rašić

The exhibition was set up on the occasion of the 130th anniversary of the founding of the Jakob Hlavka Factory in Zagreb, whose successor is the company Instrumentaria d. d.