

Jalba - from life to painting, from painting to life¹

The brief overview of information about the jalba was expanded by the author's view of some pieces of Slovenian wall paintings that depict the work frame typical for this technique.

Key words: jalba, wall paintings, female caps, folk costumes, Croatia

The female cap *jalba* was an obligatory part of the married women's headgear in villages along the river Kupa between Ozalj and Karlovac as well as in the hills to the north of the Kupa, close to the village Trg (Gabrić, 1962: 151).

Due to the situation brought about by social changes and changes in the way of life and clothing, both the cap *jalba* as part of the female headgear and other textile objects made in the *jalba* (sprang) technique came out of every-day use. Therefore, this article is not motivated by the presentation of new, still unknown data, but by the wish to recapitulate the already known and processed information, since, as Klaus Mann wrote, "*the present and the future would make no sense if the trace of the past would fade out of our consciousness.*"

Since insights about the past are sometimes discovered in unexpected places, by mere coincidence, my intention is to show in this paper an example that illustrates the possibility to reconstruct some contents of the traditional life through sources that we do not perceive as primary in the ethnological research.

The most recently published paper in Croatia dealing with the topic of the *jalba* is the study of Nerina Eckhel, which ends in the words: "*And finally, I believe that we*

¹This paper is, in principle, based on the publications about the same subject by Paula Gabrić and Nerina Eckhel (Gabrić, 1962.), (Eckhel, 1986.). The main deviation, advantageous or disadvantageous, from these publications is the temporary distance. The disadvantage that is definitively most strikingly imposed by the past time category is the impossibility to conduct field research, which implies a lack of direct link with the "real" life of an object or phenomenon characteristic to the traditional way of life.

should not permit the technique of making the jalba cap to be completely forgotten. If catalogues containing patterns and work instructions were printed as early as in the late Middle Ages, why would something similar not be attempted today, only adapted to the contemporary needs and taste." (Eckhel, 1986: 77) Bearing in mind that this technique was not adapted to new social needs and tastes, but that just the opposite to the ideas of Nerina Eckhel took place, I thought that it would be appropriate to refresh, from a contemporary distance, the memory of this technique of making textile objects for everyday use that was, even though presently abandoned, once globally known, especially among the Slavic people.

In the course of time, this specific technique was researched by numerous foreign and domestic authors. This paper presents just a brief chronological overview of the published works of domestic authors. In 1906, Jelica Belović Bernadzikowska wrote: "*Jalba is a lace, knitted on a frame from thread, cotton or silk*", defining for the first time the *jalba* as a technique based on our folklore textile (Belović - Bernadzikowska, 1906: 21). After that, in 1934, Milovan Gavazzi gave a short description of this technique, noting that it had been preserved to that time only in the village Trg at Ozalj (Gavazzi, 1934: 44). In 1935, Gavazzi also made a short film on how the cap *jalba* is made, featuring Regina Paljunac, one of the last people skilled in this technique (Eckhel, 1986: 71). The most comprehensive paper about this subject was published in 1962 by Paula Gabrić. The single paper to follow on this subject was published by Nerina Eckhel in 1986.

According to the linguistic interpretation, the term *jalba* is derived from the Slovene word *avba*, rooted in the German *die Haube*, which means cap (Belović - Bernadzikowska, 1906: 26). In Croatia, this term has multiple meanings, denoting at the same time the cap *počulica*, which is in some parts of Croatia an integral part of the married women's headgear, and the specific technique of producing transparent net-like fabric, used for the making of caps and decorative gore on shirts and towels in the regions of Pokuplje, Slavonija, Moslavina and Hrvatsko zagorje (Eckhel, 1986: 67).

This specific textile technique, based on the use a single system of threads, was known already in ancient Egypt and ancient Peru. It culminated in the medieval Europe and its traces were found until recently with Indians in the Amazon region. The knowledge of this technique was confirmed in the Scandinavian counties, Hungary and Romania. The fact that the knowledge of the *jalba* technique can be confirmed in almost all Slavic communities through recent folklore textile objects deserves particular emphasis. (Eckhel, 1986: 70). The extensive temporary and geographic presence of the *jalba* corresponds to a great number of terms, which are often completely incorrect and which were created under wrong assumptions resulting from insufficient knowledge of the exact work technology. Among the used terms are the Swedish "*spranging*", the German and Norwegian "*Sprang*", the German "*Spitzengeflecht*" and "*Flechttechnik*" as well as "*Egyptian or Coptic weaving/textile art*". (Eckhel prema Gabrić, 1986: 71)

It is useful to mention here that Milovan Gavazzi in his 1958 short review of the comprehensive work on the subject of *jalba*, published in 1957 by Ema Markova², commented on the terminology typical for this technique. In this context, Gavazzi established that this technique of producing textile objects for everyday use was referred to as "*pletanie na krosienkach*" in the Slovak language, while the Croatian language actually lacked a corresponding term. Commenting on the use of a term that would determine this specific technique in a more precise way, Gavazzi proposed the introduction of the term "*zapletna tehnika*" (entangling technique) or "*zapletanje*" (entangling) in Croatian (Gavazzi, 1958: 231).

The characteristic ornaments and terms for individual ornaments as well as the use of the thread counting system based on the number 60 in the preparatory stage are specific features indicative of the old-Slavic origin of this technique, which arrived in Europe probably in ancient times (Belović-Bernadzikowska, 1906: 26). The oldest examples of the *jalba* textile art include caps from Egyptian sepulchral findings, some of which are up to 4000 years old. (Eckhel, 1986: 69).

The *jalba* technique is characterized by several very specific features. The basic technical characteristic of this technique is definitely the use of a single system of parallel threads. As one of the prerequisites of this technique is the existence of the *lucen*, a frame over which warp threads are stretched, it must be said that it is the size of the frame that determines the lengths of the warp, and thus automatically also the length of the finished fabric. On the other hand, the width of the fabric is determined by the number of threads stretched over the frame.

The technique is based solely on the intertwining of two rows of parallel warp threads, meaning that the textiles are produced without weft threads, which is common in all types of weaving. The warp threads can be twisted from left to right or vice versa, and it is also possible to change the direction of the thread twisting in the course of work if required by a certain pattern. The basic rule to be observed is that the upper thread of one pair is twisted in the shed with the bottom thread of the next pair, which at the same time changes the direction of the shed. The most interesting characteristic of this technique is that the fabric is created simultaneously on both ends of the warp. The woman says: "*Gornju jalbu prsti delaju, a dolnju jalbu daščica ...*" (the upper sprang is made by hands, the bottom sprang by a stick) because the piece of fabric created at the bottom transversal thread is actually the negative mirror image of the one created at the top transversal thread (Gabrić, 1962: 157). By interlinking the threads at the upper part of the warp, two rows of interlinking are formed, which are getting closer to each other as the work progresses. As a result, the warp threads get shorter. Therefore, the upper and lower transversal threads need to be elastic, allowing the tension of the warp threads to be adjusted from time to time. In the course of work, four to eight wooden sticks are used to fix the shed and to push firmly against the finished rows at the upper or lower end of the warp. How firmly the stick, called *ravnalo* (ruler) in Croatia, is

² Study "Po stopach krosienok", published in Slovenski narodopis no. V, 1957

pressed against the finished interlinking rows will determine the density or looseness of the fabric. (Belović - Bernadzikowska, 1906: 22).

After the plaiting is finished and before the last stick is pulled out, the ends need to be darned, i.e. linked by a needle and thread by the *obamet* stitch in order to prevent the interlinked threads from unravelling (Eckhel, 1986: 69). If the entire fabric will be used as one piece, and not as two as in the case in the production of the cap *paculica*, the meeting point is chained by using knitting or crocheting needles, as there is not enough space to work with finger and the stick (*ravnalo*) also needs to be pulled out (Belović - Bernadzikowska, 1906: 23).

By a combination of the basic intertwining manipulations, different, but only geometrical ornaments, predominantly rhombi and horizontal or vertical zigzag lines are created. A relatively limited repertoire of ornamental motifs is the result of the specific technique.

The female headgear is definitely one of the parts of the traditional women's garments that contribute considerably to its characterization and distinctiveness. In all regions of Croatia, the headgear provides clear clues on the status changes experienced by the woman in the course of her life. By the type of the headgear, it is easy to tell whether it is worn by a girl, a younger or an older married woman or a widow. (Zorić, 1993: 48).

Only a married woman had the right or the obligation to wear the *jalba*. Besides being a mark and a symbol of the woman's new position in the family, the *jalba* fulfilled also a certain magic apotropaic function, based on the need to cover even the tiniest hair as the source of life energy to avert the influence of evil demons. After the bride received the *jalba* for the first time as part of the marital ceremony, she continued to wear it as long as she lived. The symbolism of this transitional act, the irreversible transformation of the girl into a woman and the meaning of the *jalba* itself as the symbol of the woman's position and dignity, is concentrated in the saying common in the surroundings of Marija Bistrica: "*Došla djevojka pod jalbu.*" (The girl came under the *jalba*) (Belović - Bernadzikowska, 1906: 19). The woman took her *jalba* never off, not even during the night's rest, because not even her husband was allowed to see her bareheaded or with loose hair. Women would only occasionally loosen and brush their hair, but only in the company of other women, never in the presence of a man (Gušić, 1975, s. p.). Until World War I, such caps were made by using an archaic textile technique, known also to people of ancient civilizations of the Old World (Gabrić, 1962: 151). Due to changed social circumstances in the 1920's, as well as for reasons of a purely technical nature, the number of caps made by this technique has been gradually decreasing, only to fall into complete oblivion in the period following the World War II.

In the years after World War I, probably owing to the influence of village schools, women became familiar with the crocheting technique. From that period on, the *jalba* cap, which was already worn much less frequently, is made mainly by using the crocheting hooked needle (Eckhel, 1986: 73). The crocheting technique enabled

faster production and the transfer of decorative motifs of the *jalba* made on the frame (*lucen*). In the 1950's, the *jalba* cap, regardless of the technique used in its production, passed completely out of everyday use (Eckhel, 1986: 76), just like many objects of traditional culture, especially garments.

In addition to the overview of facts characteristic for the *jalba* that were collected in Croatia, I will also mention some material evidence due to a peculiar interrelation, which speak vividly about the use of this technique in the neighbouring Slovenia in the late Middle Ages: the visual presentation of the frame used for the production of textile, similar to the *lucen*, on gothic wall paintings in the St. Mary's church in Crngrob and the St. Primož church at Kamnik. I was actually prompted to this digression by the following thought: "*Etnograf, ki bi zatiskal oči pred našo umetnostno tvornostjo, zlasti srednjeveško, bi bil podoben gospodarju, ki bi stal pred lepo skrinjo in obžaloval, da je zaprta, pri tem pa prezrl, da tiči v njej ključ, ki ga je treba samo zavrteti, in že bi se razodelo skrbnemu očesu novo bogatstvo.*"³ (Cevc, 1951: 180)

The purpose of the following example is to direct the attention towards the richness of sources and insights about the traditional way of life that can be drawn from works of art, especially sacral art.

The wall painting showing the *Holly Sunday* in the St. Mary's church in Crngrob is dated back to the period between 1460 and 1470 and represents one of the pinnacles of the development of this theme. The author probably belonged to the circle of Janez Ljubljanski⁴. The picture was discovered in 1935 and reviewed, among others, also by the Slovenian art historian France Stele. From the iconographical point of view, this work is very complex because it unites several themes, but what is important for this paper is the depiction of 47 scenes from the every-day life of the late Middle Ages, including a scene where a device resembling the Croatian *lucen* is visible.

In order to be able to talk about the thematic content of the wall painting in Crngrob, it is necessary to give brief explanation of what the term *Holy Sunday* encompasses in iconographic terms. The *Holy Sunday* is a medieval iconographic motif, probably of popular origin and with a distinctive didactic meaning, which uses allegories to emphasize the Christian duty of celebrating the Sunday as the day of the Lord. A range of signs, symbols or small genre scenes illustrate the works through which one can sin and transgress against the commandment of resting on Sundays and church holidays (Ivančević, 1990: 424).

³An ethnographer, who turns a blind eye to our works of art, especially the medieval art, is like a master who stands in front of a beautiful chest and regrets its being closed, overlooking the key that only needs to be turned in order to disclose new riches. (Author's translation)

⁴Janez Ljubljanski (Johannes de Laybaco), painter working in the middle of the 15th century. He represented the "medieval" school of painting, which culminated in pictures of the upper layer of the middle nave of the St. Mary's church Crngrob (Enciklopedija likovnih umjetnosti, 1962, II: 424 and 1964, III: 59).

Another work of art that also depicts a device resembling basically the *lucen* is the wall painting belonging to the Mother of God cycle in the St. Primož church at Kamnik, created around 1504.

In the Christian iconography, the Mother of God was conventionally presented in groups of motifs such as the Mother of God cycle. One of the scenes showing the childhood and youth of the Mother of God is iconographically denoted as "*Mother of God weaving a purple curtain*". According to the apocrypha, the high priest gave Mary, while she lived in the temple, a purple yarn to weave the temple curtain. Based on such sources, the imagination of the Middle Ages regularly showed the Mother of God as a weaver or embroiderer in the temple, similar to a novice nun in a medieval convent (Ivančević, 1990:163, 170, 171).

This topic was first tackled by France Stele in 1929, though in a completely different context: analysing the wall paintings in the St. Primož church at Kamnik from the art history aspect, he named one of the images, in accordance with the generally accepted iconography, as "... *Marija pri tkanju .../...Mary weaving...*" (Stele, 1986: 79). This is repeated in his analysis of the wall paintings in the St. Mary's church in Crngrob in 1935, where he interpreted one of the every-day scenes as "... *tkanje na statvah .../...weaving on a yarn beam....*" (Stele, 1986: 79).

Some time later, in 1951, Emilijan Cevc, a Slovenian art historian and critic, published an article titled *Etnografski problemi ob freski "Sv. Nedelje" v Crngrobu / Ethnographic issues regarding the Holy Sunday fresco, where he interpreted one of the scenes in the following way: "Tudi tkalci so zastopani: žena sedi ob kolovratu in prede, zraven navijajo nit na motorilo, ob statvah tkejo platno. / Weavers are also represented: a woman is sitting at the spinning-wheel and spinning, next to her, people are spooling yarn on a winch and weaving linen at the yarn-beam"* (Cevc, 1951: 182). This statement was taken over from the works on the same subject published previously by France Stele (Stele, 1986: 79). However, in the paper *Crngrobska pletilja / The knitting woman of Crnogrob*, published in 1958, Emilijan Cevc concentrates fully on one single detail: "*Ta priprava ni namenjena za tkanje, ampak za nekakšno pletenje. / This device is not designed for weaving, but for some sort of knitting*" (Cevc, 1958: 147).

This change of opinion is a direct consequence of the film about *jalba* that was broadcast in 1956 at the symposium of the eastern Alpine ethnologists in Ljubljana. The film, made by Milovan Gavazzi in Trg at Ozalj prompted Emilijan Cevc to reconsider the scene shown on the wall painting in Crngrob. He realized that the device defined by Stele and himself as a loom was nothing but a more complex version of the *lucen* as shown in Gavazzi's film (Baš, 1986: 79).

The interrelation of the scenes shown on the wall paintings, the Christian iconography and the textile object technique can be brought under a common denominator: the life of the people of a certain region in a certain time. It would not be reasonable to uncritically claim that the wall paintings indisputably depict a work identical to the Croatian *jalba* technique. The medieval authors have certainly taken over motifs of other authors to a certain degree. It is also certain that they were restrained in their work by the dictate of an established iconography. But, besides

all this, the fact that they had to adapt their work to the way of life and thinking of the people it was originally designed for is beyond dispute. In order to successfully fulfil this condition, medieval painters regularly adapted, even changed the iconographically set paradigm or another author's model in order to make it clear and recognizable. Bearing this in mind, we must allow for the possibility that the weaving and Mary in the process of weaving can be transformed within an individual local context, in order to establish a direct link with the life of people, into the making the *jalba* cap and Mary sitting at some sort of sprang frame (*lucen*).

Since both wall paintings are located in small environments, dislocated from the main artistic trends, it is very probable that the depiction of a device similar to the *lucen* reflects the familiarity and use of it rather than a literal copying of pattern from another surrounding (Cevc, 1958: 149). This statement does in no way question the fact, which was confirmed in several instances from the point of view of art history, that "copying" as the literal transfer of defined iconographic motifs from one environment to another was a common artistic practice of the middle ages.

The comparison of numerous details visible in these paintings justifies the assumption that they depict the process of making textile objects in the technique that corresponds to the *jalba* technique rather than to waving. If we recollect that the basic difference between these two techniques is primarily the use of a single system of parallel threads, the first thing we can notice on the pictures is that only the warp threads exist. There is not even as much as a hint of the presence of weft and it is unbelievable that the authors have simply overlooked this important technical characteristic, the more so as the system of warp and weft is clearly visible in the oldest known weaving scenes. In addition to this common feature, the scenes differ in other details. The painting in Crngrob depicts the use of sticks or *ravnala* (rulers), as they are called in Trg, while they are not visible on the Kamnik painting. On the Crnogrb painting, the upper and lower part of the thread are also more filled with the white colour, which may be interpreted as finished fabric formed at both ends of the warp, although the considerably damaged condition of the painting renders a categorical assertion of this point rather difficult. As opposed to the Kamnik painting, the technique of working with both hands, characteristic for the *jalba* technique, is vividly depicted.

The fact that the adaptation and transformation of the everyday into the iconographic and vice versa was adapted to the spirit of a period is confirmed by the recent statement by Branko Fučić: "*The presentation of the Holy Sunday on frescoes in Crnogrob at Škofja Loka in Slovenia is especially interesting. The fresco contains an entire cartoon about the Holy Sunday, as a row of small pictures showing people performing various types of hard work, which are not allowed on Sundays and church holidays. A weaver is weaving there at the loom ...*" (Fučić, 1998: 294, 296). Naturally, it is possible that Branko Fučić, adhered in his writing to certain limitations of the iconographic formula, be it on account of the formula itself, or due to his lack of knowledge about the specific *jalba* technique. However, we have to take into account the possibility that he knew the *jalba* technique, but he considered it more convenient to interpret the scene as weaving in order to bring it closer to a wide circle of recipients, who were probably

not acquainted with this technique. The acceptance of this second possibility additionally substantiates the thesis that the depiction of the frame used to make the *jalba* cap on the Slovenian wall painting results directly from living conditions rather than from a mere transfer of an established motif.

Many directions could be taken from this point. Instead of a conclusion, I will just hint two directions that take us just a step closer to a deeper knowledge of this subject.

The first is the question whether the *jalba* technique was known in Slovenia. By a combination of circumstances, the familiarity with this technique in Slovenia could be confirmed through the fact that it persisted longer in Croatia. If we assume, in addition to other possibilities, that the depiction of the sprang frame on wall painting reflects its use in everyday life, we must ask ourselves what caused the emergence of a tool in 15th century Slovenia that was more complex than the one used in Croatia of the 20th century. If the frame known in Croatia was a predecessor of the one in Slovenia, why did it remain in Croatia on a much more primitive level after even five centuries? On the other hand, if the influence took the opposite direction, which could be easily concluded based on the possible origin of the term *lučen* from the Slovenian word *locen*, meaning onion, what are the reasons of the simplification of this tool in Croatia?

Another very intriguing question is the one about the reasons for this tool coming out of use. In addition to numerous reasons resulting from broad social changes, Nerina Eckhel mentions the emergence of popular schools, where women learned the crocheting technique, as one additional factor that caused a faster disappearance of this technique (Eckhel, 1986: 73). I believe that there are sources that also point to other possibilities: there are certain data confirming that the technique used for the making of the *jalba* cap was one of the techniques taught in these public schools. (Rapo, 1999: 63). Bearing this in mind, it is obvious that this also one of the directions to be taken in the research of the *jalba*, in order to find out whether the foundation and curriculum of the public schools is related to the disappearance or to the promotion of *jalba*.

I will not continue developing these questions but rather leave them open, instead of a conclusion, as an announcement and introduction to a new study dealing with some of the open issues regarding the origin and development of the *jalba* technique used for textile objects. Despite the fact that the *jalba* cap came out of use and that the *jalba* technique fell into oblivion, this study is another piece of the puzzle that would need to fall into place in order to provide a comprehensive insight into this phenomenon related to the traditional way of life and clothing.

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