

## Towards the Definition of New Criteria for and Approaches to Collecting of Items for Museum Collections<sup>1</sup>

*Documenting and researching of everyday life and contemporary culture are extraordinarily important factors in today's activities of ethnographic museums and therefore a frequent subject of international conferences of ethnographic museums<sup>2</sup>. Ethnographic museums have different approaches to collecting, which is the cause of initiative of contemporary museological and ethnological practice for creating the new criteria for and approaches to collecting of items for museum collections. The museums work and act in an atmosphere of never ending questioning and discussions on which items from everyday life should be collected and according to which criteria<sup>3</sup>. The aim of this paper is to give a critical review of the collecting practice of the Ethnographic Museum in Zagreb so far and to try to discuss the items of today's global mass production that should be collected for museum collections.*

Key words: ethnographical museums, museum collections, Ethnographic museum Zagreb

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<sup>2</sup> There was a workshop on the NET (European network of ethnographical and social history museums) conference in 1999 in Namur, dealing with documenting everyday life.

<sup>3</sup> The criteria of the Swedish SAMDOK (international standard for documenting of the present) were established already in 1977. With certain modifications, they are valuable for collecting in general, because each collecting is being conducted in the present time.

## Review of collecting the materials in the Ethnographic Museum in Zagreb

The collections of the Ethnographic Museum in Zagreb have been created before the museum was even founded, for the most part due to Salomon Berger, who was the collector of the textile materials and the admirer of ethnographic heritage, and later also the founder of the Ethnographic Museum. At the very founding of the Ethnographic Museum in Zagreb, the mainly private collections that were obtained earlier and singled out from the inventory of the School Museum and the Museum for Arts and Crafts, have been included in the Ethnographic Museum's holdings. Therefore, the majority of the Museum's holdings is composed of the textile items dating from the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century. Among them, there are some rare examples dating from the late eighteenth, and even from the seventeenth century. From the first days of creating of the collections the only criterion that private collectors followed when collecting was the aesthetic one (the origin and the figures), and only partially the function of items. This was expressed by one-sided approach<sup>4</sup>. Such materials most often show only one and the ideal form of the reality, the "beautiful" items and nicely ornamented national costumes. This approach to collecting of materials causes repeated problems concerning the correct dating of some ethnographic items. It should also be mentioned the non-systematic and incomplete collecting of items for the museum collections. There is also a problem of the lack of museum documentation on the function of certain objects, as well as on its social and communal role.

During the period between the two World Wars, the already existing collections have been complemented by items that were not merely made of textile. Those were the items that were meant to "witness to the folk's life and customs". What was common for many ethnologists was their awareness of the deterioration of the items belonging to traditional culture, as well as of their helplessness to protect all of them by bringing them to the Museum's collections. For this reason, the habitual collecting was quite often; it resulted in the Museum's commissioners, private collectors or salespersons collecting and piling up many similar or identical items and bringing them into the Museum's holdings. The reason can also be found in the "ethnological cultural-historical method and its insisting on the research and presentation of

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<sup>4</sup>Dunja Rihtman-Auguštin points to the problem of ethnological research of clothes, that considered only the peasants' costume to be important and thus excluded the costumes of other, especially higher, social strata from the research, with the premise that it was not as important (Rihtman-Auguštin; 1988: 107). It was only in the late 1970s that the approach to collecting national costumes has changed. Therefore, examples of everyday work clothes, of children's clothes and of underwear, as well as of everyday urban clothes that was worn in the village, have found their way into the Museum's holdings. According to the total number of the obtained items in the period between 1989 and 1998, it is obvious that 57 items of underwear and 42 items of children's clothing were either purchased or received as a gift (N. Maglica; 1999: 282-283).

the Slavonic components of the Croatian culture" (I. Prica, 2001: 217). In the post-WWII period, there are more intense fieldwork research activities and collecting of items for the Museum's collections from all over former Yugoslavia. The items that were collected are witnesses to "folklore as the lively picture preserved in the present" (M. Gušić, 1951: 9). With time, the criteria for collecting have changed, so that the function and the usage of items by a particular person becomes increasingly important, although the item's aesthetic component is the one that makes the item recognizable within the context of the Croatian ethnographic heritage. Since the 1970s, the field of research has been turning towards the city, so that the custodians have conducted the research with purchase of items in the city of Zagreb and its wider surroundings.

Up until the 1990s, there were certain subjects that the ethnologists were not allowed to deal with during the socialist period. Among those were the popular religiousness and national features of the Croatian culture<sup>5</sup>. During the life in socialism, the de-christianisation has been intensely executed, so that the ethnologists have not collected items that had any Christian components. After Croatia has become independent from Yugoslavia, since 1991, there have been some changes in relation with evaluating the ethnographic traditions by the politicians, as well as by the widest public. During this period, the intensive collecting of items dealing with certain Catholic holidays (Christmas and Easter), such as Nativity scenes, Easter eggs, as well as items dealing with certain life customs, took place<sup>6</sup>. During the Homeland War (1991-1995), the priority collecting of items saved from the war-inflicted areas also took place<sup>7</sup>.

Ethnographic collections have a total lack of items that simply have not been sought-after and collected, and which would have been witnesses to the development of industrial plants and their products, the status of workers, the culture of workers' lives, their nutrition, the position of workers' families and children, their social life and life in settlements, as well as to different human groups that existed in the past, and still do exist<sup>8</sup>. So, there was a straight politics of collecting the items that belonged to the pre-industrial and rural population. The objects that were created through the mass production were considered to have a short life-span, as well as to be subject to quick disappearance, and therefore not suitable for the ethnographic collections. Therefore, the priority for being collected went to the items made by vil-

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<sup>5</sup> The collection of sacral objects has contained merely two crucifixes and one prayer-book until 1991; there was no collecting of items for this collection after the WW II.

<sup>6</sup> A total of 422 items for the collection of customs and beliefs were collected in the period between 1989 and 1998 (N. Maglica; 1999: 304-306).

<sup>7</sup> In 1999, the exhibition "Baranja se šareni" ("Baranja in Many Colours") took place. It showed a part of items purchased from the region of Baranja while it was occupied.

<sup>8</sup> In 1994, and in the occasion of the 900th anniversary of the Zagreb Diocese, the exhibition "Zagrebačke uspomene" ("Zagreb Memories") took place. It showed the process of widening of the narrow city boundaries to the suburbs, as well as the urban population of all the strata, together with the sub-urban population.

lage craftsmen during the second half of the twentieth century, as well as some industrial products that were used in everyday life in the village homes<sup>9</sup>.

The more contemporary approach for purchasing of museum items during the fieldwork research was planned. Such purchase were to be the result of the programme and the custodians' fieldwork research in the present. This form of collecting will first attempt to contextualise certain items in relation with persons who had used them in the defined period of time.

Several isolated items of traditional clothes made after the WWII and influenced by the fashion of the period, that show the application of novelties, that is, the introduction of different textiles in the traditional clothing objects, have been purchased for the holdings of the Ethnographic Museum in Zagreb during the last couple of years. The changes in traditional clothes are primarily observable in the mass produced textiles they were made of (and that replace the home-made woven linen), then in sketches, and also in usage of the traditional techniques of ornamentations and embroidery on the ready-made mass products<sup>10</sup>. The same way, the collection of clothes that combine the regional variants of national costume and ready-made clothes began. Unfortunately, those are only isolated examples, because the collection of mass produced objects that are still used in both rural and urban everyday life, is conducted only for individual museum exhibitions. After such exhibition is over, the inclusion of those items into museum collections depend on individual custodians.

## Towards the definition of criteria for collecting of contemporary items

We live in a society that has undergone some major and rapid changes during the last fifty years; from fashion, lifestyle, new ideologies to the birth of the Internet. Everyday life has knuckled under the trends of globalisation and market, and it happened both in villages and in cities to the same extent. The contemporary field of research and purchase of the museum items should be moved towards the "recognition of the transformation of the traditional expressions within the new functions and meanings" (D. Rihtman-Auguštin, 1988: 79). The public should always know that it is a choice, the one based on particular persons. The collecting of items for

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<sup>9</sup>An example for this would be the furniture produced in the 1950s and the 1960s and that marked the whole period (the furniture for the bedroom made of veneer or the popular white kitchen cupboard). Those items have been in use until today.

<sup>10</sup>For example, items from the regions of Pokupje, Žumberak and Podravina that not only document the changes and complement the existing collection, but are also connected with the persons who wore them, as well as with the occasions in which they were worn, have been collected for the collection of the national costumes from the Northwest Croatia. Such items have their complete context (their function, as well as their social and communal role) documented.

ethnographic collections should be directed towards the items of the consumer society, the items that marked everyday life of an era. For example, ready-made clothes (dealing with a particular person) should be collected, the clothes that reflect the taste of an individual and that marked a specific period (for example, the sixties), as well as the clothes worn by members of certain age and social groups that form the contemporary urban picture. Dunja Rihtman-Auguštin has pointed to the need for research and collecting of different costumes of sub-urban populations, the costumes that are influenced by the economic migrants and thus includes specific choices from European fashion<sup>11</sup> (D. Rihtman-Auguštin, 1988: 111). A new collection, devoted to contemporary clothes or everyday life, should be created for those kind of items<sup>12</sup>. The material culture should be dealt with in connection with the social and other, and individual phenomena should be observed within the complete process. The items belonging to the contemporary objects of consumer mass culture that marked certain periods of the last century should certainly be included<sup>13</sup>.

The task of ethnographic museums is to collect the present and to recognize the items of the present that would be potential documents of the present life in the future. Ethnographic museums are not only meant to collect and protect our heritage, but also to include theoretical (ethnological/anthropological and museological) aspects into the practice in order to get acquainted with the manifold meanings of these subjects.

An item can be approached as a reflection and a means of globalisation of culture, but also through its different interpretations. By the very act of being bought, a mass produced item ceases to be merely a mass ready-made product: by being singled out and bought<sup>14</sup>, it gains new values that it did not have until that moment, because it was picked out for a particular person, and by being used by this person, its process of being singled out is over. Its usage opens a new circle of meanings, because the

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<sup>11</sup> Examples that have remained for a long time in village or semi-village communities include pleated synthetic ("trevira") skirts (likely due to its similarity with the national costume), man's leather hat and checkered jackets, and out-of-style shoes with high soles (D. Rihtman-Auguštin; 1988: 111).

<sup>12</sup> The future research and collecting should be directed towards the present, that is, towards the items that are used in today's everyday life. For example, the mass produced furniture that is a sign of a certain period of taste and social life, shopping trips to Palmanova in Italy to buy the Italian designer furniture, the Croatian Šavrić furniture factory and the production of furniture made of the Slavonian oak... Examples of consumer society are also Zepter and AMC dishes as a sign of certain lifestyle and prestige. There are also items characteristic to the local production (of Yugoslavia or Croatia) or items that have been brought back from a tourist or shopping trip abroad.

<sup>13</sup> The eternally discussed problem in ethnology is whether or not to collect items such as jeans. The meaning of jeans as a museum item has been described in a very thought-provoking way by the ethnologists of the Slovenian Ethnological Museum in Ljubljana (Keršič, Rogelj-Škaraf, Skrtelj, Žagar; 2002; 92).

<sup>14</sup> The motivation of a particular individual for picking out and buying such an item could also be researched.

item is being accustomed to the person that uses it in his or her everyday life. For example, DocMarten's boots have originally been created in the 1940s as orthopaedic boots and were sold in Britain as working boots until the 1960s. Since the 1970s, they became an element of different youth subcultures such as punk, new-punk and grunge. The usage and combining of DocMarten's boots leads to the creation of individual cultural product. For the members of subcultures, the creation of their own styles is the reflection of their political views on class and cultural identity (belonging). Those styles include clothes, music and dance, as well as other forms of the culture of young people who hang out together. It is indeed in fashion and fashion styles that we can observe the process of the change in clothes in which there are two participants: on the one hand, there is the mass production and on the other hand, the individual's choice. The individual's choice is based on his or her taste. The whole concept of taste is, as Lisa Cartwright argues, partly based on the system of values that valorizes the tastes of middle and upper classes<sup>15</sup> (Struken, Cartwright, 2001: 45).

So, the meaning of a certain item is changed by its context and thus continues the manifold chain of meaning of items as ethnological/anthropological documents. If we continue to observe an item as a museum document/object, its chain of meaning changes and goes on. At the moment when that item has been chosen according to certain museological criteria and included in a museum collection, it becomes a museum item. By including an item into the museum collection and by presenting it to the visitors either in temporary or in permanent exhibitions, we have added our meanings and our values to this item, and the same item is going to receive some new changes in its communication with the visitor, and the never ending chain of meaning of this item will continue (Maroević, 1990: 156). In order for an item to become a museum item, the process of selection, that is, of research outside of the museum context, is of an utmost importance. Such research are the basis for all further research into which we bring our knowledge about what this particular item presents, when it was made, what material was used for its creation, what was the technique used for its creation, who was its owner, and in what kind of social and cultural environment it was placed before being brought to the museum. According to Ivo Maroević, the collecting of items for the museum holdings is at the same time a form of scholarly documentation from which all forms of interpretation and communication of values of collected items arise (Maroević, 1990: 157).

The majority of people possesses items that gain importance in their everyday life. People are surrounded by objects in their homes, at work, and some of them with time even become collectors of particular kinds of objects. Objects and people have a certain contact and tell stories through the unique interpretation of objects. A strong personal experience, as well as emotive meanings can be included in some objects (for example, the names and dates of birth of a family's children engraved on the inside of the wardrobe's door). Such objects represent the memory or remembering.

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<sup>15</sup> What can be considered "in bad taste" by some members of a society, can be considered "in good taste" by the others.

Objects can also be used to express our cultural belonging (for example, objects from the hometown that have been brought into the new urban homes). The identities start to grow stronger when life is (territorially) removed from the place considered to be home, because space is created as the mental space of a certain nation (for example, clothes and objects that encircle members of some groups express their belonging to their nation).

Sometimes an item has not been in our lives for a long time, but yet it becomes enriched with strong meanings (for example, an instrument of a musician who played it during the peak of his or her fame, as well as the clothes).

At the end of this discussion we can conclude that the meaning of an individual object of mass culture changes depending on the way of observing it (in an ethnological/anthropological or museological way), on the change of its (social and communal) environment and its context (its used, its function when being used and the meanings it had in everyday life). The meaning of an item is created and interpreted through both personal and social process.

## Conclusion

In our everyday lives, we are surrounded by objects (and participate in their making, production, usage and finally their falling into oblivion). Those objects are the documents of everyday life that is subject to on-going changes. The collecting for our collections should be directed towards the items that can be found in usage (from the special to the banal ones, from the hand-made to the mass produced). They will, in turn, create many signs of complex and culturally oriented reality. At the same time, those objects have to be innovative, stimulative and provokative, as well as related to the reality, to the present and have to be placed into the perspective of an ethnographic view<sup>16</sup>. The striving of the museum professionals working at ethnographic museums to find new criteria for the selection of contemporary items open numerous old and new topics to be discussed, as well as new re-thinking of the meaning of the museum item.

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<sup>16</sup> In some museum exhibitions contemporary styles by fashion designers inspired by the sketch or the embroidery of the national costumes have been exhibited. The question arises whether some designer items should be included into the museum collections? Such items have not yet been purchased for a museum collection, but I argue that it should be necessary to include those items as well, because they themselves are the reflection of today's contemporary creations inspired by the traditional heritage.