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"Wedge-Shaped Clothes – Origin and Existence in Istria"

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The presentation of textile objects is quite a rarity in our museums¹ which is why the "Wedge-Shaped Clothes" exhibition was truly a welcome enrichment of the otherwise modest offer of such events.

Although it was primarily appealing to experts and those familiar with the basic typology of textile tailoring, the title of the exhibition sounded intriguing enough in its own right to incite the curiosity of the public. The exhibition was well attended also thanks to activities related to the pedagogical program of the museum. For the duration of the exhibition, the museum organized workshops and special exhibitions for the Zagreb and Pula Schools of Applied Arts and Design, as well as for the Faculty of Textile Technology of Zagreb.

The exhibition is based on years of ethnological scientific and research work of Jelka Radauš-Ribarić (Ph.D.). Besides other duties (including managerial duties at the Ethnographic Museum from 1965 to 1975), she invested a lot of energy into field research. One of the dominant subjects of her interest has been the manufacture of the female folk costume in Istria, about which she wrote and defended her doctor's dissertation in 1965. This interesting research was published some thirty years later, in 1997. One part of the dissertation, now also available in book form, is the presentation of wedge-shaped clothes, which ultimately also became the main theme of the

¹ Not only due to restricted conservation conditions, especially in terms of lighting and air conditioning as well as strict safekeeping and presentation measures to be observed, but also because there are relatively few researchers specializing in textile objects.

exhibition staged by the Ethnographic Museum. Since this study concept attempts to determine the specifics of the appearance of wedge-shaped garments and uses numerous (direct or indirect) comparative examples from various sites to illustrate the intertwinement of various cultures in Europe, we can perhaps agree with the statement of Ms. Radauš-Ribarić that this exhibition is "*the most European exhibition ever presented in the Ethnographic Museum*".

A number of terms have been used to describe the creation of the wedge-shaped clothes, but the common trait of all of them is that the clothes are cut in the form of wedges with tips turned to the upper part of the garment. For that reason, the clothes are considerably narrower at the top than at the bottom, where they spread out in the form of a bell. It is not easy at all to determine the precise temporal and spatial coordinates for this very logical, practical and probably universal tailoring practice, which may go back to ancient clothing inventory. This is why Ms. Radauš-Ribarić, despite her very comprehensive argumentation, still has debatable comparative analogies and open issues about this subject. Some of the questions have been, after all, posed by the author herself, for instance, how and why certain tailoring and dress varieties last longer than others, what is the secret for their persistence, why some forms also appear in areas where they are not expected to, and the like.

According to the author's research, the wedge-shaped cut has been in use for a long time, it survived many cultural epochs and its origins can be traced to the north-western part of the European continent. Its characteristics appear in the garment of the peoples who migrated in ancient times from that region, which was the intersection of the Slavic and German world.

On the Croatian territory, the wedge-shaped dress was particularly significant for the regions of Ćićarija, Labinština and western Istria. The population of this area, which settled during the first migration wave from the 7th to the 9th century, used this type of clothing for over thousand years. Rather than further listing the author's theses, it will suffice to cast a glance on the content and concept of the accompanying exhibition catalogue, which clearly illustrates the thematic structure of the entire project. It begins with introductory and contextual remarks, including basic information about Istria and the wedge-shaped clothes as one of the distinctive traits of this region. It continues with a more elaborate study of the wedge-shaped garment, supplemented by visuals illustrating the historical development and preserved parts of costumes. The section between these two chapters as well as the closing section of the catalogue is dedicated to the technical aspects which enabled the creation of this variety of textile tailoring².

The exhibition is located at the raised ground-floor (right wing) of the Ethnographic Museum, in a room which is often used for temporary exhibitions. It

² Some sub-topics deal with the technical process: weaving on a vertical loom; loom with horizontally stretched warp; weaving with the help of the weaver's shuttle (possibility to stretch fabric of unlimited length, warp divided into even and odd threads); characteristics of the fabric production technology of Slavs; narrow fabric; construction of garments from rows of vertical narrow fabric bands.

is definitely a better choice than the third floor (where such exhibitions are also presented), as it is not easy for everyone to climb the high and narrow stairs. It is also known that the communication channels to and through the exhibition must be as simple as possible and fully accessible in every conceivable sense. Such seemingly trivial issues must be certainly taken into consideration. In this context, I can mention my student experience, when I was working as a guide at the exhibitions of the "Mimara" Museum. I remember that the first floor of the exhibition space was somehow manageable for most of the visitors, but the other floors, well... hardly or not at all.

The visual design of the exhibition at the Ethnographic Museum was created by graduate designer Nikolina Jelavić Mitrović. In the situation when the Croatian exhibition space is dominated by no more than two exhibition designers, the architects Mario Beusan and Željko Kovačić, it is not simple at all to compete with their rich exhibition staging and various effects. It is also not a matter of competition, although comparisons are always welcome. In brief, "the spatial design" of the exhibition "Wedge-Shaped Clothes" can be described by several key concepts: minimalism, simplicity, fluid spatial design, continuous interfusion and nuanced highlighting of individual thematic entities mainly through light accents or subtle details (e.g. the thread has been suggested by using a horizontal and vertical raster of white rope, evocative of an oversized cross section of the weaving structure). Despite its balanced visual impression, however, this exhibition comes across as too quiet, too still and too neutral, especially from the perspective of younger generations who expect more a more dynamic approach. However, this brings up a very serious presentation and communication problem: the right measure of approaching (and even pandering of) the audience. Personally, I prefer correct, even "old-fashioned" approaches rather than attractions at any cost, where the original objects often get lost. I am aware of the great gap between desires and possibilities, between the concept and the final realization, as well as numerous inevitable compromises made in the course of preparing the exhibition, but certain elements (perhaps at least an appropriate sound background!) would considerably contribute to the overall museum experience of this exhibition.

Let us look at the basic division of the exhibited material. Two-dimensional, flat objects are placed mainly on or at the walls: photographs, maps and large thick wooden panels cut out in the form of wedge-shaped clothes. These wooden cut-outs are an attractive idea and the dominating sign, almost the trademark of the exhibition. A similar method was used to present Viking sailing-ships and their sails made of narrow, long stripes of fabric, which fit into the concept of wedge-shaped textile cuts. Most of the exhibition wall is covered by photographs arranged in such way to reflect and follow the basic conceptual development of the theme as much as possible. The same photographs are also contained in the accompanying exhibition catalogue. Just to mention some of the illustrations, as they clearly show the width of the contextual approach: the figure of St. Sophie on the pulpit of the St. Sylvester parish church, custody from Vrh near Buzet, the fresco of the Visitation of Mary to Elisabeth of Beram, Eve in the fresco of Hrastovlje, storing the woven fabric in rolls, the Horned One of Gundersrup in Denmark, the design of Viking clothes found in

Greenland, Bayeux tapestry, ceramic figurine of Dupljaja, Ulrich of Regensburg, the clasp of Vače, a Croatian king with subjects, a figure from the Visigoth code, the Norman bishop Odo, the biblical king Solomon, the porch of the Chartres cathedral, "Burgundy fashion" in a tapestry from the 15th century and other photographs. Besides that, there are also the always welcome and educational maps illustrating the distribution of the wedge-shaped clothes in the past and the present, a map of the Istrian peninsula with regions where individual variations of the costume were in use, as well as a map depicting migrations of German tribes.

Three-dimensional objects were placed more to the interior of the exhibition space and, as already mentioned, harmoniously arranged in terms of space design, especially in view of the considerable height. Original museum objects - dark dresses made of rough fabric - were hung on very simple, minimalist stands made of square wooden boards and metal constructions, while light coloured specimen (such as the interesting chemise (*kamižot*) cut in gores) were placed closer to the wall. Besides the garments, this group of objects also includes ceramic figurines, archaeological findings, furniture (wardrobes), looms and mass vestments. I believe that more comprehensive information about the exhibits (especially the dates) could contribute to a better understanding of the objects themselves as well as the entire context.

To conclude this brief review, it seems that the wedge-shaped clothes design has provided a stimulus to fashion designers and other "textile experts" and that creative interpretations of traditional garments, as an excellent way of linking the past and the present, are soon to be expected. I am positive that the *kamižot* could be also a very good wearable "souvenir".

Translated by Sanja Novak