

Nikolina Jelavić Mitrović

Ethnographic museum Zagreb

njelavic@etnografski-muzej.hr

## What is an Exhibition: A Designer's View of the Subject of Exhibition Design

This paper is an attempt at explaining what exhibition design is and how I approach it as a designer, with special focus on the *Wedge-Shaped Clothes* exhibition presented at the Ethnographic Museum of Zagreb from November 2002 to February 2003. It should be a sort of reaction to Snježana Pavičić's review of this exhibition, published in this issue of *Ethnological Research*. I would like to stress that such texts about exhibitions are always welcome, since they are quite rare in Croatia, just like experts dealing systematically with reviews of such frequent projects as exhibitions.

To begin with, it is important to define the participants in the realization process of an exhibition. Beside the author as the project manager, the team consists of various experts. One of them is the author of the visual and spatial set-up of the exhibition, usually a designer or architect. The author of the exhibition selects his or her team and defines the concept, in Croatia most frequently a chronological or thematic one. The concept is the central issue and the starting point of an exhibition. It depends on the concept to what extent an exhibition will be modern, interesting and understandable to all who want to learn more about the subject. The concept determines the look, organization and visual identity of the exhibition. Design has recently experienced a great expansion, to a lesser degree also in Croatia. The exhibition design therefore receives growing attention and an increasing number of curators understand that to create an interesting and well-attended exhibition they need the help of experts who will develop an exhibition design adapted to the requirements of modern society. Design is a conjunction of the functional and the beautiful, the unity of function and aesthetics.

The first and most important task of the person responsible for the visual design of the exhibition is the communication with the visitor. It is of ultimate importance to bring the subject closer to the visitors, to provide the easiest ways for the visitor to

learn about the subject and move through it. The designer gives a visual presentation of the exhibition subject and defines the atmosphere of the space. The designer's approach to the subject is also important. The objects at the exhibition, mainly from the museum holdings, are drawn out of context and no longer used for their original purpose. They are given a new role; they become museum objects and must be treated as such. The moment we put an object, for instance a bowl on a base (a pedestal of sorts), it ceases being (merely) a bowl as a museum object - it becomes a museum object that is regarded differently. So the object starts a different life. Its primary function changes: other values grow stronger at the expense of its former functional value. An ethnographic object is often self-sufficient; it is difficult not to cross the line when we place it in a certain context. What does it mean to exhibit? Where should we place the object and what relations does it create to other objects? What is the result of a possible interrelation of those objects? What must be highlighted? These are the starting points of design. The designer must establish a balance and use the elements of design to influence the creation of a certain visitor impression, which is extremely important. The result of the designer's work is always in the service of the exhibition; it must not dominate the objects, especially in case of certain ethnographic themes. When the design is dominant and the objects in the background, the designer has failed. By designing the exhibition elements, the designer suggests the visitors an impression about a certain subject - through colour, shape and spatial design. The designer turns the visitors' point of view of the object and the theme upside down, offering them the chance to gain a new perspective.

I would like to explain the design concept of the *Wedge-Shaped Clothes* exhibition. It was important to explain what the wedge-shaped clothes are about, their origin, development and survival in Istria. It is a broad subject stretching from the Middle Bronze Age to the present time. The subject of weaving is interesting and, I must say, perceived as complicated to all who have no knowledge about it. How to explain today, in times of garment industry and mass production, the methods and processes of textile production and the immeasurable value of an individual clothing object? The production of textile is based on the weft and warp system, creating a raster, which was often in my mind in the course of designing the exhibition. I wanted the people to feel this raster, to be pervaded by the intertwinement and entanglement of threads and to experience through the exhibition the complexity of the textile production methods on the one hand and the simple and basic quality of the warp and weft system on the other hand.

The visitors enter the exhibition space and observe the introductory theme "immersed" in a raster projected from the ceiling. Since it serves as an introduction to the theme, I used a neutral colour of the past to distinguish it from the different colours of the rest of the exhibition. The colour and shape of the exhibition elements help the visitors to feel the theme. I chose the colour of the Istrian soil because of its strong symbolism of the inseparable interconnection of man and land. The second part of the exhibition shows various methods of weaving and the spreading of wedge-shaped clothes through the historical migrations of peoples. This

great movement is suggested by two Viking ships (as a means of locomotion), dominating by their size this segment of the exhibition. They were reconstructed from drawings and shown two-dimensionally, the accent being on the woven sails and their construction. Numerous photographs and drawings flow continuously along the wall and make it easier for the visitor to understand the development of the wedge-shaped clothes.

The visitors then enter the third exhibition segment focusing on wedge-shaped clothes in Croatia. They move through entangled threads of a large-size weaving, visually separating this space from the previous segment. The visitors can feel the threads on themselves. The space is again laced with shades of a multiplying raster, suggesting repeatedly the complexity of weaving and helping the visitor to approach the theme.

Like with every exhibition, the selection of materials for exhibition elements is also important. The cold, raw, slightly corroding metal construction relates to the coarse woven cloth and contrasts with fine white textile, gossamer-like chemises which are treated as pictures and hang suspended at the wall, emphasized by Malevich's plane, again in the colour of the Istrian soil. This is counterpoised by clothes designs shown in 1:1 scale at the opposite side of the space, illustrating the construction complexity of an individual piece of clothing. They are made from a material that enabled a relief highlighting of the wedge-shaped intrusions. This section of the exhibition also shows a typically Istrian landscape, as it is the context in which this type of clothing was created and represents in a certain sense the background of the theme. The folk costumes stand freely in the space and can be viewed from all sides. They are placed on a metal sub-construction enabling a three-dimensional presentation of the costume, which is invisible to the visitors, helping them to focus on the material without being distracted by unnecessary information (face and construction of a possible puppet).

How to make the exhibition "livelier" and more modern? When does a group of selected objects become an interesting exhibition? How to incite the visitors' interest to visit the exhibition: by an interesting theme attracting numerous visitors, so that the exhibition becomes "liverier" because it is well visited? All this is predetermined by the concept selected by the author of the exhibition, who is also the one who ultimately decides on the music in the exhibition. To make an exhibition interesting also to the younger public, authors introduce various modern techniques (sound, multimedia, etc.). The selection of music is also a form of communication with the visitor: it must be related to the exhibition theme and help the customer experience the theme also from the aspect of sound. It was difficult to select the music for this exhibition. What kind of music would be appropriate for a theme stretching from the Bronze Age to the present? Personally, I support the introduction of technology into an exhibition wherever there are reasons to do so. It is just one of the elements that help bringing the theme closer to the visitor, but not an end in itself.

The exhibition was accompanied by numerous wedge-shaped clothes workshops for textile design students. The "incorporation" of their works into the exhibition gave

it a new dimension and attracted to audience to (re)visit the exhibition. Their works, exhibited next to the original objects, provided a new, contemporary layer to the theme and gave the exhibition a new meaning.

The design is also a matter of the author's personality. It would be interesting to see how two different designers in cooperation with two different authors would set up an exhibition with the same theme.

Finally, I have no intention to complain about the conditions encountered at the Ethnographic Museum. The visitors can and should anyway not know about these conditions - they just see the final result and make their judgment based on what they see. The only great objection is directed to the lighting, which is a very important element of the exhibition design. The out-dated and weak lighting in this space imposes considerable limits and prevents the designer from fully realizing the concept. Regarding the issue of souvenirs, this could be the subject of a separate discussion...

Translated by Sanja Novak