

Aida Brenko
Mirjana Randić

Ethnographic museum Zagreb
abrenko@etnografski-muzej.hr
mrandic@etnografski-muzej.hr

Review of the *Folk Medicine* Exhibition

In 2001 the Ethnographic Museum in Zagreb presented the exhibition entitled "Folk Medicine". The authors of the exhibition are members of the Museum staff - Mirjana Randić, Museum Advisor, and Aida Brenko, Mr. Sc., Senior Curator. Nikolina Jelavić Mitrović, graduate designer, was responsible for the visual design of the exhibition. The exhibition was organized in cooperation with a number of institutions and experts from various fields of science: medicine, pharmacy and botany. A special form of cooperation was achieved with the Department of History of Medicine Sciences of the Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts (HAZU), the "Andrija Štampar" School of Public Health, the Faculty of Pharmacy and Biochemistry and the "Fran Kušan" Pharmaceutical Botanical Garden. Cooperation through borrowing of material was established with kindred institutions and individuals from all over Croatia. The exhibition was also made possible thanks to the Anti-Museum, the Museum of Arts and Crafts, the Treasury of the Zagreb Cathedral, the Diocesan Museum, the Museum of Varaždinske Toplice, the Museum of Maritime History and History of the Croatian Littoral, Rijeka, and many others.

The study of folk medicine was motivated by the fact that so far this subject has not been researched in Croatia from the ethnological and museological aspect. In the course of the two-year research of informal medicine, various practices, beliefs and attitudes towards illness and health in our region were researched. Fieldwork encompassed a large part of Croatia: the regions of Podravina, Slavonija, Srijem, Lika, Hrvatsko primorje, Istra, the city of Zadar and its hinterland as well as the capital city of Zagreb and its surroundings.

Folk medicine has been treated as a cultural category with different ideological and economic significances in various periods and for various social strata. The exhibition focused on traditions that existed in our regions in the past, and are still present both in urban and rural areas. The most common ways of folk medicine treat-

ment were healing with herbs and magic as well as healing based on religious beliefs. All these methods are also used today in alternative medicine treatment of patients. Although some of the experts dealing with the subject of official and unofficial medicine consider alternative medicine a contemporary form of folk medicine, it must be emphasized that the present context in which alternative medicine is used does also use methods of folk medicine, but is considerably different from the context of the 19th and the 20th century. The oldest exhibits go back to the 18th century and refer to the first printed (folk) medicine books. The major part of the exhibited material dates from the 19th and the 20th centuries, although many practices and concepts of illness are considerably older and represent a link with the early beginnings of healing and care for fellow human creatures. The exhibition illustrates not only the role of the professional healers, but stresses the role of the woman, who contributed to health and life through her care for children and the sick in the family, and whose importance is often overlooked. Folk medicine is presented both from the perspective of the patient and from the perspective of the medical practitioners, by highlighting not only the universal character of folk medicine, but also its local character based on available material. For a better overview of the material, the healers were classified according to techniques applied and the medicines according to basic ingredients. Although some techniques are more rational and other more founded on magic or religion, all these elements intertwine in practice.

The exhibition opens with Leonardo's drawing of a Man, who is a symbol of perfect proportions; the superimposed circle and square contain also the pentagram, a symbol of a man, but also a magical sign for healing and protecting from illness. The introductory part of the exhibition shows messages about health, intended to convince people of their responsibility for their own health and to raise their awareness of the constant presence of illness. Exhibits such as garlic, olive oil, cornel and other represent associations linked to the concepts of health and illness in our culture. Their role is accentuated by the symbolism of colours in folk tradition, where red colour stands for birth and life, while white represents illness and death.

Healing with medicinal herbs represents a separate entity of the exhibition and are presented depending on the structure and form of the material. A particularly good solution proved to be the presentation of herbs in the form of a large-size herbarium on a white wall, where every of the approximately fifty specimen of favourite herbs in folk medicine was exhibited together with basic information and its name in Croatian and Latin. The herbs were presented in the form most commonly found in peasants houses - spread out to dry on an even surface of a chest or a sieve, or hanging in bunches from the ceiling. Healing with herbs was shown both in the religious and magic context.

One part of the exhibition was dedicated to folk medicine practitioners, who talked to the authors and demonstrated their practices during field research. They were presented on oversized photographs showing their everyday surroundings to emphasize their double role: their activities may be veiled in mystery, but simultaneously we can

see that they are real people, neighbours and relatives. This segment of the exhibition is accompanied by a film demonstrating their healing techniques and skills.

Red and white showcases, placed diagonally in the exhibition room, formed separate spaces of imaginary healing rooms of folk medicine practitioners. They could be viewed from both sides, suggesting thus the face and back of healing, the health and sickness, the help and damage that can be caused to a patient.

The designer's approach to the presentation of magic elements in healing was to use colours to illustrate the relationship between the help seeker and help provider. The visitors passed through a big quadrangular house, which was painted red to symbolize life on the outside and grey to symbolize death on the inside. In the middle of the floor there was an illuminated magical circle composed of elements needed by the medicine man to diagnose illness and determine the method of healing. On-site audio recordings of ritual magic healing formulas were used as background sound effects.

The part of the exhibition dealing with the mother and child relationship was placed in showcases arranged in a semicircle, thus symbolizing the mother's arms holding and protecting the child. It featured a range of small valuable objects made of silver and precious stones, serving the purpose of protecting the girl, the bride, the pregnant woman, the mother and the child from the *evil eye* or spells. The showcases were connected in the middle by a sheet richly decorated with embroidery in the apotropaic red colour, allowing glimpses of a child being born, as it used to be in reality until the mid-twentieth century in many parts of Croatia, when women remained *behind* the sheets for forty days after childbirth.

A part of the exhibition was conceived as the presentation of the religious component of healing. The scenery of this part was coloured blue (which was often used for painting church vaults), evoking a chapel where believers would pray for health first to the Mother of God as the universal patron and then to one of the patron saints for certain illnesses, which were shown as statues or altar-paintings. Silver and wax anatomic votive objects, of which some have been now made accessible to the public for the first time, are a characteristic expression of popular religious practices.

One of the exhibition themes was the activity of the "Andrija Štampar" School of Public Health, which shows the perception of folk medicine from the aspect of official medicine. In the twenties and thirties of the 20th century, the experts of the School invested great enthusiasm into "enlightening" the Croatian rural population by organizing courses on hygiene, prevention of contagious diseases and the care of patients. This approach is suggested by even and light surfaces of the scenery and lighting which emphasizes the impression of cleanness, sterility and airiness, thus creating a framework of the School activities. The exhibited material was supplemented by propaganda films recorded by the School in the early decades of the 20th century.

The pedagogical workshop featured the 'witch hut', an exhibit in the form of a small house with shelves full of sorcery requisites and a witch figure brewing magic

potions. Here the intention of the authors was to present witchcraft in a fairy-tale form, but at the same time educationally, in order to teach children also about the good aspects of women who were skilled in preparing remedies. The witch hut was a great success not only with children, but also with adult visitors, which is why it was left after the end of the exhibition for pedagogic purposes.

Since the field occupied by folk medicine is a very wide one, the exhibition could not show all aspects of traditional healing. This was compensated by a comprehensive bilingual catalogue and texts written by the authors of the exhibition, together with Željko Dugac, Mr. Sc., Assistant at the Department of History of Medicine Sciences of the Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts (HAZU), Prof. Vladimir Grdinić (Ph.D.) of the Faculty of Pharmacy and Biochemistry, as well as Boris Farkaš (Ph.D.), healthy housing advisor. The intention of the catalogue was to deal with the topic of folk medicine from different aspects.

Although numerous instructions for the treatment of various illnesses by natural and tried methods of folk medicine were shown at the exhibition and described in the catalogue, it was not the intention of the authors to promote this way of medical treatment, but to present the man's relationship towards health, his natural and social environment as well as various concepts of the origin of illnesses and their cures in the past and the present.

The exhibition was accompanied by a range of lectures and workshops held not only by ethnologists, but also experts from other fields of science, who presented topics relevant for folk medicine.

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Translated by Sanja Novak