

Irena Kolbas

Ethnographic museum

Zagreb

Croatia

ikolbas@etnografski-muzej.hr

Istria: Different Perspectives

Exhibition at the Ethnographic Museum
in Zagreb, April 9 to October 12, 2003

From spring to autumn 2003 the Ethnographic Museum in Zagreb staged the exhibition *Istria: Different Perspectives*. It was a visiting exhibition of the Ethnographic Museum of Istria, created in cooperation with the Austrian Ethnographic Museum of Vienna and its associated Schloss Kitsee Museum.

What was the main theme of this exhibition?

The first part of the exhibition dealt with the reason why Istria, as a marginal region of Austria-Hungary, became interesting at all to Vienna, the Monarchy and its culture. Istria, as the Austrian littoral, was primarily attractive as a climatic health resort and a travel destination for the Austrian tourists of the time. During their stay in Istria, tourists and convalescents discovered also the distinctive quality of its cuisine. This is how the "ethnographic" interest in Istria came to life. The Viennese Ethnographic Museum started collecting objects of utility in the Istrian cuisine. The collected objects were exhibited as "the Istrian fireplace", a term that became synonymous with the whole of Istria and with glazed pottery, which was actually not Istrian. The richly coloured glazed pottery was probably chosen for aesthetic reasons: collectors found it certainly more attractive than the non-glazed, soot-stained real Istrian ceramic. This also explains why no objects related to husbandry (wine-growing, olive-growing, fishery and other activities) were collected.

The attractiveness of the objects is a big problem in selecting material for museum holdings. It is especially pronounced in ethnography, where objects are mainly selected according to some completely obscure aesthetic criteria of the curators, whereas the relevance of the object is often a criterion of lesser importance. This was a problem in the past, and still is a problem in the present days. Although this topic would require a separate paper, it should be at least mentioned in this context.

The second part of the exhibition deals with what intrigued the ethnographers of the Monarchy, namely the linguistic and cultural variety of Istria. To them, Istria meant

a journey to the past. The "backwardness" of Istria was considered to be "good material" for real ethnographic research. The same approach is often still present today. The lesser developed a region is considered to be, the more valuable it is assumed in terms ethnographic research. The more wretched and destitute the life of the peasant was, the better it could reflect the real "folk lore". A rewarding example for this kind of approach was found by the ethnographers of the Monarchy in the people of Čići. A significant problem faced by the ethnographers of that time was the differentiation of numerous ethnic groups based on customary categories such as language, costume, physiognomy etc. Contemporary ethnographers and linguists still fight over the same issues in view of many regions, including Istria: who are the Istro-Romanians and to which group does the Istro-Romanian language belong, what place in the system is occupied by the Istriot language and what are its relations to the previously mentioned language ...¹. Among folk costumes, which are usually considered to be first-class representatives of a nation's ethnography, the exhibition presents the modest and "poorer" Istrian folk garments, which happened to include also one from the island of Krk. This is perhaps no accident, since the Romanians, who were settled by the Frankopan family on the island of Krk, later moved to the region of Čićarija or settled at the foot of the Učka mountain.

The third part of the exhibition deals with the influence of the railway, which brought the Istrian coastland closer to the Monarchy, on the life of the Istrian population. Thanks to the railway, many people could get employed and iron was increasingly used for everyday life purposes (e.g., railway tracks were used as andirons for hearths while train brakes were turned into anvils).

After World War I, Istria came under the rule of Italy, so that emphasis was placed on the Italian characteristics of the Istrian people. After World War II, stress was laid on the Slavic characteristics of the same population. The interest of ethnologists was primarily directed to the village and its history.

Since Croatia gained its independence from Yugoslavia, Istra has tried to define itself as a multicultural environment, which it always has been, and not just an Italian, Croatian, Slovenian, Istro-Rumanian or another "homogenous" entity. This multiculturalism is presented through souvenirs which are "universally" Istrian, such as *kažun* (Istrian field stone shelter), *boškarin* (autochthonous Istrian cattle breed), goats and various objects inspired by the shape of Istria are an expression of the contemporary Istrian culture.

This very good exhibition problematizes the ethnological and museological work. Such approach which is extremely rare, at least in Croatia, where ethnographic exhibitions usually come down to ethnographic picture-books. The exhibition presents "different perspectives" intriguing to expert ethnologists and museologists,

¹ The situation is additionally obscured by *Ethnologue*, the most relevant and quoted listing of languages of the worlds, which allegedly focuses especially on "lesser-known" languages, but still carries for instance the incorrect information that Croatian minority in Austria speaks Serbo-Croatian (see.: www.ethnologue.com).

being at the same time understandable to other visitors. In addition, it has managed to remain objective on the slippery ground of political history, political ethnography and, it could be said, political museography.

Translated by Sanja Novak