

## **SOME THOUGHTS ON POLITICAL AND CULTURAL ASPECTS OF PERMANENT EXHIBITIONS AT THE MUSEUM OF THE CITY OF ZAGREB**

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In the case of the Zagreb City Museum, the great political changes in both state and society, which will be reflected in the new permanent exhibition, took place in 1990 parallel with, yet independent from, the dismantling of the 1977 exhibition which had been done according to the aesthetic principles and museological purism of the 1970s. Several elements coincided to bring about the current task of conceiving a new permanent exhibition at the Museum of the City of Zagreb.

- 1) The almost twenty-year old exhibition was in need of a reinterpretation of the city's history
- 2) A need for adequately large premises for the exhibition "Old Zagreb Craft Guilds," realized jointly by the Museum of the City of Zagreb and the Croatian History Museum, that encompassed a number of objects from various museums and staged early in 1991, and
- 3) The beginning of the war in Croatia, which made it necessary to store all objects in the summer of 1991

The previous permanent exhibition was determined by several co-ordinates. A) Lack of exhibition premises, which resulted in a city chronology presented only up to the end of the 19th century; the visitors would leave the Museum without any information concerning this century which has been, perhaps, decisive for the shape of life of modern Zagreb. It has been in the 20th century that Zagreb has grown into a modern urban centre, connected with Europe by traffic routes, and has built its major economic, educational and cultural facilities as well as residential buildings and quarters, at the same time reflecting the reality of life of impoverished population strata. B) Inadequate professional staff - only four historians and art historians. C) Meagre, insufficient funding for organized team work which resulted in extremely slow realization; the exhibition was in preparation for eight years, from 1969 to 1977. D) A set approach to the collection of museum material, focusing on Baroque and Biedermeier, with only rare acquisitions of Sezession and Art Deco, as period styles were undergoing re-evaluation. E) In this context, but with political connotations, collecting of objects from the period between the two World Wars, was crucial for Zagreb. This period saw the rise of the upper classes whose affluence generated a life style appropriate to highly developed urban centres, from business and economy to fashion and entertainment, but on the other hand also led to extreme poverty, workers' slums and protests. As the new regime of 1945 rejected, even condemned, previous civilizational attainments, and started "idealistically" anew, turning the wheel of history backwards, the entire period, save for political issues, was virtually obliterated.

The 1941-1945 period in Zagreb was proscribed altogether. During that time, Zagreb was the capital of the Independent State of Croatia, and as such had a life of its own - from being a centre of the then political power and administration, the seat of Axis countries embassies, to the fear of air-raid

alerts, bombing, poverty, hunger and food stamps, as well as large art exhibitions. Zagreb was also the centre of an illegal resistance movement, which was allowed to be studied, but without too much emphasis being placed on it, since the new state found even this segment of Zagreb's and Croatia's history odious. The self-evident fact that Croatia, as economically most developed, was the only country where a workers' rebellion could have broken out, with tradition dating back to the 19th century, was systematically denied due to the Croatian reluctance to accept the centralistic state of old Yugoslavia. The professional knowledge of curators meant little where the proscribed period was concerned and it was best not to collect the material, but rather cross out those years and leave them for better times. Thanks to those curators who remained faithful to the principles of their vocation, today we are uncovering objects from that period deep in the museum stores hidden, unlisted, unresearched, yet carefully stored as historical evidence. Ordinary museum objects - portraits, maps, flags, landscapes - they nevertheless speak of their own fate or that of their authors'. When I hold them in my hands, I first think of the person who brought them to be stored in the Museum, thus giving me an opportunity to study them, but also to feel proud for doing this job. F) Curators had to mount repeated exhibitions on the subject of the National Liberation Struggle G) The post-war period was not interpreted according to the principle of a necessary fifty-year distance. Just as it is impossible to separate the professional duties of a curator in the city museum from his personal attitude towards the city, his individual and subjective experience of the city he lives in, it is also impossible to separate the city itself from its museum. The city museum is not and cannot be merely a museum of objects, regardless of their value, that are defined only by stylistic or historical categories, because as such they only illustrate the city's existence in time. Collecting them, we have fulfilled only the primary task of our profession, that of providing material records, and it is only through our presentation that this material will attain its full value as evidence of the city's true life. The truth is complex and therefore requires that the city can be seen as a living organism subject to changes initiated by people, events and political circumstances that may, directly and indirectly, affect its history. The historical truth is shaped by an interaction of many diverse facts, and I have therefore chose two examples that would perhaps best illustrate the complexity of the interpretation of Zagreb's history and the impact of politics on the understanding of a particular period.

Zagreb has much architecture from the 1930s, similar in style to buildings in central Europe, as it was designed by architects who studied at the same schools and academies in Vienna, Prague or Munich, in the spirit of a rational approach to modern architecture. They proved their quality and creativity by showing respect for the size of the city, its characteristic space and specific elements of its architectural heritage. There are no instances of architectural disparity from those years of the type so common in the 1960s: buildings that remain as a shameful reminder of the time that violated the historic complexes without any feeling and at all costs. This refers to the city's two largest central squares, whose names changed through history with political changes and depending on the current state.

**First example:**

The central square, originally named after Ban Josip Jelacic, resumed its name in 1990. In the 18th century, the large clearing, suitable for a market place, was called Harmica after the Hungarian for "the thirtieth," which was the due paid for the merchandise sold. In 1850 the square was named after Ban Josip Jelacic, the key figure in the Croatian National Revival and the governor (Ban) of Croatia appointed in 1848. In 1866, an equestrian monument to Ban Jelacic was erected in the square, which soon became a symbol of Zagreb. After the Second World War and the establishment of the communist regime in 1946, the name of the square was changed into the Square of the Republic (of Yugoslavia) and the monument was removed overnight. Again, it was thanks to one man, his deep ethical sense, professional responsibility and great personal courage that the sculpture was preserved: Mr Antun Bauer, the then Plaster Cast Museum Director, did not throw the monument into scrap metal as ordered, but expertly disassembled it and stored it in the coal shed, far enough away from the curious eyes of those in power. Fifty years later, with the return of the old name, the monument too was returned to the square, a fine bronze equestrian sculpture by the Viennese sculptor Anton Dominik Fernkorn, the author of a further four public sculptures in Zagreb, commissioned in the second half of the 19th century to enhance the city.

Our distinguished elder colleague has fortunately lived to see this, but although it is outside the scope of this paper, I must mention some other things he has lived to see: during the aggression on Croatia and occupation of Vukovar, in November of 1991, the valuable art collection that Mr. Bauer had donated to his native Vukovar was stolen; Vukovar no longer exists and neither does its beautiful city museum.

Zagreb's main square, that began to receive its urbanistic articulation in the early 19th century, is a harmonious whole encompassing Biedermeier buildings of the 1830s, representative and decorative historicist buildings of the 1880s, elegant Sezession from the early 20th century and the minimalist De Stijl facade by the famous German architect Peter Behrens of 1927. The representative bank and hotel buildings are characteristic of Art Deco of the 1930s, and even the Assicurazioni Generali building by Piacentini of 1937, although conspicuous with its volume and size, fits well into the heterogeneous architectural complex.

But the skyscraper, built in the 1960s, has nothing in common with the square that received it. The tall prefabricated metal and glass structure, cheaply executed, was probably meant to tower over all historic buildings and events that had taken place on the square. It was an arrogant and uncritical competition for the poignant vertical of the Zagreb Cathedral spires, a monument that had soared above the modern Zagreb at the end of the last century when the city was growing and developing according to plan, and before that, a monument which had guarded over the city for centuries - the old cathedral and fortress that had been standing there from the Middle Ages to the 19th century as a tribute to spiritual, material and artistic values that testify to the existence of Zagreb and Croatia within European history and culture.

**The second example:**

The Square of Marshal Tito, named so in 1946, and going backwards in history, Square of King Alexander between the two World Wars, Theatre Square, University Square, down to its oldest name, Fair Square, after the first fairs held there in 1864 and 1891. The names show that it was usually named after institutions located there and later after prominent state figures.

I shall try to describe the finely balanced beauty of the square, that was built during the last two decades of the 19th century and is very important in Zagreb's town plan, as it was the last in the line closing the semi-circle of green squares first laid out according to the First Regulation of the Lower Town in 1864 and completed according to the Second Regulation of 1887. The square is surrounded by the buildings of national institutions: University Rectorate, Arts and Crafts School, Museum of Arts and Crafts, Teachers Hall, Chamber of Commerce and Crafts, Gymnastics Society and, in the centre, the Croatian National Theatre. All buildings are designed in historic styles, from neo-romanesque to neo-baroque, by prominent architects from Zagreb or Vienna, such as the architects who designed both Zagreb's and Vienna's theatres. Similar to the skyscraper I have already mentioned, a metal and glass office building was erected on the vacant lot on the corner of the square in the 1960s, occupying a space which does not belong to it. The forum of architectural heritage of a historic period when the foundation had been set for development of Zagreb, also bearing cultural significance due to major national institution located there, had to receive a building which satisfied no criteria whatsoever, not even the elementary architectural ones. It simply forced its way into this "hall" of knowledge, art and music, and still stands today to remind us of the ambitions of a regime that could not or would not honour its predecessors. This regime was also unable, or unwilling, to come to terms with the dualism of those personalities whose great energy and activity had done much to help Zagreb prosper in cultural and material terms, but who had to sacrifice their ethical principles in order to function as public figures. It is almost incredible that the city museum displayed the photographs of representative architecture that marked the advance in Zagreb's development without giving credit to the person who made this prosperity possible despite the Hungarian hegemony that oppressed Croatia at the time. Just as Ban Khuen Hedervary during his rule from 1883 to 1903 stood for political dictatorship, so Dr. Iso Krsnjavi, his Minister for Education and Culture, stood for prosperity of Zagreb; consciously abandoning his role of political opponent to become a collaborator, in the mere five years as minister, from 1891-1896, Krsnjavi did so much that his cultural achievements outmatched the political reputation of the Ban. An anecdote from history will illustrate this: when in 1895 the Emperor Franz Joseph came to Zagreb for the opening of the Croatian National Theatre, he visited all cultural and public institutions built at Krsnjavi's initiative: the Theatre, Arts and Crafts School, the large grammar school complex and the Music Institute - in fact, he strolled around the very square I have talked about.

After comparative research has finally illuminated and defined the historical role and complex personality of Dr. Iso Krsnjavi, it obviously becomes necessary to present this in the museum that shows the city's history with an emphasis on the mutual ties between the man and the city. This is a

prerequisite, regardless whether the person in question is an influential minister or an ordinary citizen, because without it the picture of the city remains incomplete and biased. If people are present in the city museum only through their portraits, mere museum exhibits without a proper context provided by curators, nothing of the true history and the life of the city is revealed.

The words of Dr. Iso Krsnjavi that I wish to quote at the end may sound romantic, but if you think of Croatia's anguish - the war, the devastation, and her many dead - the fact that Europe still rejects this small part of its own history, you will realize that they have lost none of their force:

*"In the difficult battle for the survival of a people,  
culture is a strong and shiny shield."*