

## TRYING TO GRASP MULTICULTURALITY: NEW MUSEOLOGICAL PRACTICE IN ISTRIA

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Istria is a peninsula located in the most western part of Croatia, and its northern border roughly coincides with the road connecting two large major harbour cities: Rijeka in Croatia and Trieste in Italy. Although the largest part of Istria is in Croatia, one part belongs to neighbouring Slovenia, and a quite small portion around the township of Muggia is also in Italy. This administrative diversity was even more marked in the history of Istria; moreover the constantly changing borders and rulers became a kind of symbol of of Istrian past.

From the Middle Ages until the fall of the Venetian Republic, the Istrian coast and part of the hinterland were Venetian territory, while its central and north-eastern parts were under Austrian rule. With time, the Venetian dialect of the Italian language and its pertaining culture prevailed in the former part. The Austrian part of Istria was not subject at that time to linguistic and other cultural influences from the north, so that various dialects of the Croatian and Slovenian languages were used in unhindered communication. The prolonged wars between Austria and the Venetian Republic, and famine and plague during the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, emptied some parts of Istrian territory. Austria, and Venice particularly, systematically settled new inhabitants in these areas. They arrived in large groups from Dalmatia and its hinterland, and to a lesser extent from today's Montenegro, Albania and other regions. The results of these movements can still be seen today in the great variety of dialects and cultural elements of varied origins. After the fall of Venice and Napoleon's short-lived rule, Austria took control of all of Istria and stressed its ethnic *hybridismus*, fascinated with the archaic cultural forms, which she herself had partly produced. For example, just a few kilometres from Opatija, that is, Abbazia, that fashionable resort of the Austrian aristocracy, lived the i, some of whom spoke the Istro-Romanian language, since they were descendants of the Romanised Balkan livestock-keepers, who had migrated to Istria in their flight from the Turiksh freath. This speech has remained right up to the present.

During their rule, the Austrian politicians were already aware of and tried to control the budding revival movements and waves of national awareness. They first emerged in Trieste, aiming to establish Italian national homogenisation, and then in parts of Istria in which the Croatian and Slovenian national component was emphasised. Both national movements contained the dangerous seeds of nationalism and chauvinism. After the disappearance of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, Istria became part of Italy and experienced the consequences of this worldview. Unlike Austria, Italy saw Istria in the linguistic and cultural aspects only as Italian territory, and the schools using the Croatian and Slovenian languages were abolished. The Italian authorities went as far as prohibiting the public use of these Slavic languages, which were spoken by at least half of the inhabitants of Istria. For these reasons, and some others, thousands of families emigrated from Istria. The repression culminated in the form of Fascism of the 1930s and 1940s. Then, after the end of World War II, a new totalitarianism replaced the former one. The Yugoslavian liberators with their Communist orientation emphasised only the Slavic component in Istria, and saw all others, particularly the Italian elements, as a threat or at least as an obstruction. Owing to overall nationalisation and profound changes in the social and political environment, tens of thousands of Italian families moved out of Istria and settled in Italy. Istria was left with many semi-populated and even abandoned townships, and people came from the entire territory of the former Yugoslavia to settle in them. As a military port, the largest town in Istria, Pula, became home to a large number of military personnel, often originally from Serbia.

Then another war broke out, followed by yet another new "official" view of Istria. After the independence of Croatia, of which Istria was now a part, of course, the new president of Croatia greeted the people of Istria, but spoke only to its ethnic Croats. This enraged not only those who were not Croats, but also a considerably increasing part of the Istrian population who identified themselves simply as *Istriani* / Istrians. Because of their own complex and ethnically mixed origins, they did not want to identify themselves in the context of any national group. This new self-identification - Istrian - was encouraged by the local political parties which were regionally oriented. They are still in power in Istria and emphasise the cultural specificity of their region in relation to the other part of Croatia. They stress the multi-cultural nature of Istria, and the right of its inhabitants to declare themselves as Istrians, and, on a broader plane, support efforts for a higher degree of autonomy for the region.

I felt it necessary to provide you with basic information on these historical facts connected with Istria to help to make clearer the current issues which arise in the museological interpretation of Istrian culture. I am an ethnologist by profession and head up the Ethnographic Museum of Istria, which is located in the very heart of Istria, in Pazin. The Museum was founded by the Country to document and interpret all the diversities of Istrian culture. Ours is the only institution which

engages in ethnology, and also tests out various forms of "anthropology at home". So our approach is not solely museological; we also apply other methods in analysis and interpretation of individual cultural phenomena. Just now, we are faced with the necessity to make meaningful our new display. Our job is made harder by the fact that, to date, there has been no synthesis which would have interpreted the culture of Istria. In any case, most of the texts about Istria were written by those who came from the centres such as Zagreb, Ljubljana or Trieste. Quite often they understood or identified only those components of the culture which were similar to their own language and cultural background. In addition, Istria's eternal problem had always been that the centres of power have been located far outside of it, and they were the ones who made both key decisions, and interpretations of culture. So it is fairly difficult for ethnologists today to read off from the texts written at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the period between the two world wars or even the post-war period, without detailed knowledge of the ideological denominators which defined the interests and attitudes of their authors.

However, it still happens that ethnography is written from the viewpoint of one's own national identity. A considerable number of texts have appeared in print over the last few decades with titles such as, for example, "Istrian Folk Customs", published in Croatia; or "*Folklore Istriano*", published in Trieste, Italy, which covered material of exclusively the Croatian or Italian population. Such undertakings additionally deepen the impression of exclusivity, the separate state of individual cultures, whether that impression corresponds to the actual picture in individual Istrian communities. Texts which monitor such phenomena among diverse populations are extremely rare.

Why do we want to change our display as it has been to date? On the one hand, because it is museographically obsolete, reflects the methodological approach characteristic to the Yugoslavian ethno-museography of the 1970s, but mostly because it presents an incomplete and partial image of Istrian culture. Only village culture is shown, culture from some imagined past. Only Croatian peasants are taken as the theme, since their culture was designated as "autochthonous", "ancient", and "archaic". The Italian population was not of interest to the ethnography of that time, since their culture, usually that of the townships on the Istrian coast, had more urban elements and, at that, of "foreign" origin. In addition, our display does not contain information on the cultures of the diverse ethnic groups and peoples who existed and still exist in Istria. The exhibition on show contains items which are generally known throughout Istria, and not those which could perhaps indicate the cultural diversity and specificity of individual micro-cultures. In that way, a model of an ethnographic exhibition as such was created, and then repeated in a series of smaller permanent ethnographic displays in the various townships of Istria. All of them follow the principle of exhibiting those items which are characteristic to all of Istria, and not to their community or parish, so that a series of these permanent exhibitions are very similar to each other. The public knows ahead of time what to expect at such ethnographic exhibitions and finds them fairly boring.

However, apart from such unified exhibitions within Istria and outside it, individuals, local communities and emigrants have expressed their need for a different type of museum presentation of individual and collective memory and living experience. Various motivations and various ways of presentation are in question here, but what they all have in common is the need felt for their museum collections to be / to remain in their domicile community. Thus, for example, the township of Vodnjan / Dignano used to be inhabited largely by ethnic Italians, now much fewer in number. Activists of the Italian Community and people working in the municipality offices there have been trying for years to find a permanent home for the material that has been collected, which would serve to document life as it once was in Vodnjan. However, they have not been able to find a way to fund their project.

Those Italians who left Istria after World War II took with them some of their household items. For years they were stored in harbour warehouses in Trieste. Only recently, premises have been set aside in Trieste in which these items will be organised into a permanent ethnographic display. Unfortunately, in this project, as is the case with many others in the sphere of culture, each group, community or institutions works alone for itself, without co-operation from professionals from "outside groups". This can lead to one-sided results. On the other hand, just because they are sometimes one-sided, they are more direct in showing their "truth" about Istria. This makes them even more interesting subjects to ethnologists / anthropologists.

Very interesting in that sense is the *Museo della Citta di Fiume* (Museum of the City of Fiume), Fiume today being the Croatian harbour city, Rijeka. The museum is in Rome, and it was founded by people who had left Rijeka in the late 1940s and early 1950s. That great exodus of the Italian population from what was at time the immediate centre which made up Rijeka, is interpreted in the museum's collection. It also shows the everyday life of the city before their departure, the street signs with the names of the streets, photographs of the familiar street personages, all of which try to create the atmosphere of the city which disappeared, in the cultural sense, together with its departing citizens. The alternative atmosphere of the city of Fiume has been re-created, and it exists in this way only in that museum. By the way, I have heard that there is an idea in existence about changing the permanent display because it is obsolete, and in a certain way is not in keeping with political correctness, as it is understood today. On the other hand, just as it is, it is a direct expression of the impulse to display in museums dramatic events in the life of a group, so that I think it should at least be documented in detail before any changes are made.

Let us return once more to Istrian territory itself. The examples I have given until now point to the fact that there is a series of multiple "truths" which do not exist only in history, but also in the present. All of them are entitled today to their legitimacy and we can evaluate them all like the parts a mosaic of the overall experience of Istrian culture. They are not

merely the reflection of diverse views and attitudes of particular ethnic groups and peoples, but also of the diverse political authorities which ruled Istria in the past and do so in the present. In any case, we believe, of course, that each interpretation of culture is a subjective construct of a particular person or institution, under the influence of specific ideologies, personalities or the "spirit of the times". Different ethnographies often speak a lot about the very people who have created them.

However, how can we express all these notions and express these dilemmas through a permanent display of the ethnography of Istria, and, secondarily, through exhibitions from time to time.? We are certain that such a permanent display, apart from providing fundamental information, would need to a certain extent to reflect our doubts and questions, and not simply once again offer a new truth. We believe that we should try to show not only the diversity of the cultural forms, but also the diversity of the approaches of which I have been speaking. However - and in our case of the shortcomings of a permanent display as such - there is always the danger of offering up a "ready-made" truth, which would then be fixed - almost petrified - for a certain period in our museum for the next ten to twenty years. That is why we constantly re-start our work on major exhibitions. Working on them we comprehend and learn many things which will help us in later synthesis.

In the final part of my text I would like to inform you about two recent projects of ours which reflect much of what has been said. In our efforts to be consistent in our critical approach to the sources of Istrian ethnographic sources, we have started to study the professional texts and museum approaches of Austro-Hungarian ethnologists who visited Istria from time to time. They collected a considerable number of items at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and, later, they were stored for decades in the Austrian Ethnographic Museum in Vienna. Thanks to our good contacts with Austrian colleagues, we decided last year to arrange a joint exhibition prepared together by Austrian and Istrian ethnologists / museologists in order to show that material. One of the aims was to answer the question of how the Austrians saw and interpreted Istria at that time a century ago. A part of the work we in Istria had to do related to how Istria experienced Austrian rule, and which myths about the Austrian presence still exist today. Since the exhibition was conceived as a dialogue between colleagues from different countries, who had in the past lived in a shared state, it was necessary in the second part to show what happened later in Istria on the professional scene, after World War II; and what had been the characteristics of that ethno-museology.

It was seen that the Austrians at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century had collected "beautiful" and attractive items, often exceptional and special. Many had been produced outside of Istria's geographical borders, but had been used in Istria. A series of the articles belong primarily to the heritage of inhabitants of the Italian-speaking areas. When a famous "Istrian Kitchen" was displayed at the Vienna Ethnographic Museum prior to World War I, it contained elements of both village and urban hearths, a combination which could not have existed in reality.

Post-war ethnography offered a completely different image of Istrian traditional heritage, so that one could conclude initially that some other cultural region was in question. Emphasising only the most archaic objects, largely of Slavic origin, all items connected to foreign and/or urban influence were virtually disregarded in the way explained in the first part of this text. For example, instead of colourful majolica, only unglazed ceramics were exhibited.

The two periods being compared give different ethnographies. Therefore, the entire exhibition is called "Istria Through Different Views". The visitor entering each area first meets glass in a specific colour, so that it becomes clear that these views are differently coloured, also literally, through which each view is literally of a different colour. The last look at the culture of Istria is the region's own view of its own culture, expressed in the production of souvenirs, which have with time become ever-present symbols of the traditional culture of Istria, consumed to a great extent by Istrians themselves.

It seems to me that one of the greatest assets of this project lies in the very fact that the four of us - two from Austria, and two from Croatia, that is, Istria - put together this project in close co-operation and dialogue. Becoming aware of one's own past through a different way of thinking, learning during that process about the methodology and approach of colleagues, brought us to those viewpoints which we would not have arrived at without being able to observe them from various aspects. We put questions to each other and opened up themes we would not have even thought of without the opportunities we had to encounter the experience and thinking of the "Other", opening up new ways of thinking in the conception of "one's own." After having opened our exhibition in May, it now seems to me that it should not be any other way, although we all needed quite a lot of endurance and will to bridge the entire series of practical problems associated with the implementation of this project.

Questions I asked myself when I saw the exhibition completed and ready for its opening were: how communicative it is it, how much is today's public interested in all those professional and ideological changes in these somewhat tiresome parts of Europe, and isn't this exhibition actually for a narrow circle of specialists? I do not know the answers, but it looks as though our small group of ethnologists in Istria really does need to carry out some "major clean-up" in the ethnomuseography and ethnology of Istria, before moving forward. The last project I would like to say a few words about is the exhibition on souvenir production in Istria. After being on display in our museum in Pazin for almost a year, it is moving this month to the Ethnographic Museum in Zagreb. At first glance, this seems a marginal theme, but it concerns a very interesting process of self-definition and identification. Those souvenirs are produced in Istria and they use the symbolics which the social and political elite has also recognised during the last decade as "typical" and "characteristic" to

Istria, since the regional orientation of Istria has been stressed, along with its specificity, which includes its multicultural nature. So, for the first time, objects have emerged which represent Istria, although they are meant for tourists. Admittedly, tourists do buy them, but they are being bought primarily by the domiciled population and it would be hard to find any private premises, taverns, and business premises in Istria which do not contain such items. Therefore, the interpretation that the Istrians themselves experience their own culture brilliantly could be shown through the phenomenology of the production and distribution of souvenirs. Another point of interest is that the most highly represented themes are just those from the village, traditional life of Istria. Such emphasis on rural culture is the result of the general rustification of the Istrian region, particularly after largely members of the urban layers of the population left Istria after World War II, while a "quiet" draining away of young educated people can still be seen today. The ethnomuseological interpretation throughout forty years which, as the outcome of the general ideology of the time, conveyed the message that the authentic component of our essence was found in the elementary, the village, the genuine - was an influence on the cultural definition being based on rural elements.

Thus, this text has not only spoken of the complexity of the situation which emerges from Istria's multicultural nature, but also of the frequent changes of those who have ruled Istria over the last hundred years, producing various "truths" about its culture and its people. The position of an ethnographic museum in such a situation seems to me to be quite demanding, particularly if the intention is to interpret the culture in an analytical and critical way.

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