

Bridging Cultures and Affirming Fashion Museology: Exhibition Maison Barilli: Belgrade / New York as a Cultural Hub

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Abstract:

This paper will discuss how the fashion exhibition *Maison Barilli: Belgrade / New York* sparked collaboration between local museums while at the same time it initiated an awareness of fashion museology as a valid museum practice at the national level, and of Serbian fashion heritage internationally. As such, it has served as a positive catalyst for the implementation of fashion museology through traditionally conceptualized art museums and canonized art historical figures like Milena Pavlović Barilli. This way, the concept of fashion as a museological practice of the “future” (compared to Serbian painting-dominated exhibit production) was introduced to local audiences gradually, by respecting tradition and artistic legacy while at the same time offering a fresh perspective on heritage and cultural diversity, and becoming a cultural hub.

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Introduction

The exhibition *Maison Barilli: Belgrade / New York* marked the first fashion exhibition in both institutions where it was organized –(December 2017 – February 2018), and The Pavle Beljanski Memorial Collection in Novi Sad, Serbia (September – October 2018).



Figure 1. Exhibition poster for *Maison Barilli: Belgrade / New York*, December 2017 – February 2018, and the cover of the publication, *One Study of High Fashion and High Art*, 2017. ©The Gallery of Milena Pavlović Barilli, Požarevac, Serbia. Design: Nemanja Stanojević; Photo: Mario Lisovski

While The Gallery of Milena Pavlović Barilli has showcased fashion items before (illustration, photography, magazines, clothes) both through their permanent collection displays and temporary exhibits, it never featured a show structured after the principles of fashion museology nor devoted solely to fashion phenomena. The reason for the lack of fashion exhibitions at The Gallery, despite the fact that Milena Pavlović Barilli (5.11.1909. – 6.3.1945.), the artist whose works the institution safeguards, realized a prolific fashion oeuvre, lies in her art historical canonization. The formation of The Gallery in 1961 coincided with the publication of the first monograph on the artist a few years later in 1966. Both were initiated by Miodrag B. Protić, the founder of Belgrade’s Museum of Contemporary Art and one of

Serbia's key figures of 20th century art history and criticism. As such, Protić initiated further museological positioning and art historical analyses of Barilli's life and work. However, given the Socialist Yugoslav and patriarchal Balkan setting, fashion has been completely omitted from Barilli's canonization within the framework of national art history in favor of her painting.

Protić, and many others after him, saw Barilli's fashion works as commercial side effects done out of necessity which altered the "purity" of the "highest" form of art she produced – the painting. On the other side, by challenging these seemingly cemented interpretations and the canon itself, research work on *Maison Barilli: Belgrade / New York* proved that Barilli in fact created fashion illustrations exclusively for the first decade of her activity as an artist both educationally and professionally, before creating her first painting. The main goal of the exhibition and the accompanying publication, titled *One Study of High Fashion and High Art*, was to position Barilli's fashion works as equally artistic and valid as her paintings, and as such to offer a new reading of a traditionally established art historical figure through a more contemporaneous museological practice – fashion museology.

Affirming fashion museology

Winning The Pavle Beljanski Memorial Collection Award for the Best Thesis in Art History played a crucial role in equating the value of Barilli's fashion works with her paintings. The Award, given for half a century in order to foster new interpretations of national art by emerging art historians celebrated its 50th Jubilee in 2017, by awarding the MA thesis *Fashion Illustrations of Milena Pavlović Barilli* which served as the base for the exhibition. This was only the second time in the award's 50 year history that a fashion related thesis won. While the thesis was defended at the Department of Art History of the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade, the University still doesn't have a program in fashion studies. It was, however, the first awarded thesis actually conducted in the framework of fashion studies – history, theory, and museology – rather than methodologies of art history. The research for the thesis which gradually turned into the exhibition was undertaken at The Gallery of Milena Pavlović Barilli, but since the award is given by The Pavle Beljanski Memorial Collection, that institution hosted the exhibit as well.

The exhibition featured the selection of over fifty out of several hundred fashion illustrations Milena Pavlović Barilli created during her education and professional career in Serbia, Germany, France, and the USA. As main tenets of the exhibit were to affirm fashion museology and to endorse intercultural dialogue, the exhibit was, for precisely those reasons, named *Maison Barilli: Belgrade / New York*. In Serbian and Italian art histories, as Barilli was partially Italian on her father's side, terms "home of Pavlović" and "Casa Barilli" are often used in regard to Barilli's art – primarily painting and poetry. The first term refers to a traditional, conservative Serbian bourgeois home in Požarevac, Serbia, where her mother Danica Pavlović (a pianist) was brought up. The second term alludes to a musical and poetic home of her father Bruno Barilli (a music critic and a poet) in Parma, Italy. Both can be, as Griselda Pollock discussed, "recognized as examples of private areas or domestic space... the spaces of bourgeois recreation, display and those social rituals which constituted polite society." (Pollock 1988, 56) In both places Barilli was able to develop into a socially acceptable woman practicing art forms approved by patriarchy and heteronormative art history: painting and poetry. As such, little, or rather no space was left for the academia to recognize Barilli's fashion works.

By using the term referring to fashion houses – *maison* - the new dimension was added to Barilli's oeuvre and its museological placement - the dimension of fashion. Since an early age, both in Serbia and Italy, as it can be seen from her childhood drawings, Barilli's main occupation

as a child perceiving the world around her was fashion; landscapes, animals, and family scenes were barely of any interest to her.



Figure 2. Milena Pavlović Barilli, childhood drawing, 1920; ©The Gallery of Milena Pavlović Barilli, Požarevac, Serbia

This occupation was shaped academically in Belgrade at the Royal School of Art in which Barilli enrolled in 1923, and got its professional form in New York City, where she arrived in 1939 and remained until her death in 1945, working as a fashion illustrator. For this reason, Belgrade and New York were used as starting and ending points of Barilli's fashion narrative, accentuating her contribution not only to the national but global, particularly western, fashion discourse as well. Additionally, such a title aimed at establishing Belgrade on the global map of fashion to, as David Gilbert in *World Cities of Fashion* finds, "emphasize symbolic geography in which the city itself becomes an integral part of branding." (Gilbert 2011, 237) The branding,

often reserved for Paris, New York, Milan, and London in the construction of the world order of fashion, is why Belgrade was put alongside New York.

Fashion as an intercultural hub

Barilli's works thus far have been classified based on art movements she followed in her paintings and places where she created them (e.g. Metaphysical period, Roman period). Time she spent in Belgrade, during which she created only fashion illustrations has been referred to as "the schooling phase," without mentioning her fashion works. The final phase of her activity in New York is the only phase in which Serbian art history acknowledged Barilli's fashion engagements, even though it labeled them as commercial and not artistic, suggesting that these two qualities are mutually exclusive. Instead of following already established art historical classification, the exhibition offered a new one, which integrated fashion illustrations in the complete artistic production of Milena Pavlović Barilli, and vice versa, as the artist first became a fashion illustrator, and later on a painter. In regard to that, *Maison Barilli: Belgrade / New York* was structured after the theory of Serbian fashion anthropologist Mirjana Prošić-Dvornić, who found that "spatial and architectural phenomena communicate similarly to clothes." (Prošić-Dvornić 2016, 146) The exhibition, operating as an (inter)cultural hub and a certain map of Barilli's fashion production, was thus divided in four parts: Belgrade fashion illustrations, Munich fashion illustrations, Paris fashion illustrations, and New York fashion illustrations, being the four cities in which the artist was active as a fashion illustrator.

Barilli's relationship with the arts of other countries, and with those of Serbian modern art, was first and foremost explained in regard to Italian and French painting – Renaissance, Metaphysical, Surrealist, including European Surrealist painting in the USA. However, fashion was as well a catalyst and a hub of multiculturalism and intercultural dialogue in the life and work of Milena Pavlović Barilli, which is what the four parts of the exhibit aimed to demonstrate.



Left: Figure 3. Milena Pavlović Barilli, *Caricature of Queen Maria*, 1923, ©The Gallery of Milena Pavlović Barilli, Požarevac, Serbia



Right: Figure 4. Milena Pavlović Barilli, *Baroque*, 1928, ©The Gallery of Milena Pavlović Barilli, Požarevac, Serbia

Fashion illustrations Barilli created in Belgrade in the 1920s confirm that Eastern Europe and The Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes were not culturally isolated and that the region should not be perceived as Europe's internal exotic other, which is the status quo among Eurocentrist fashion academia. During her studies in Belgrade, Barilli transcended the geopolitical framework she was living in and delivered the spirit of the jazz age, roaring twenties and Art Deco fashion. Being exposed to Queen Maria and Princess Olga's high fashion consumption, and the Western fashions she encountered on travels with her parents, the artist constructed one of a kind visual language of haute couture in Serbia. Illustrations created in Belgrade are the only examples of the national visual culture representing Western haute couture: designs of Cartier, Redfern, Lelong, Molyneux, Patou, Worth, Poiret, and fashion illustrations of illustrators who worked for Vogue. These illustrations can serve as affirmative examples in establishing fashion history in the country and promoting Serbian fashion heritage internationally.

Fashion works realized in Munich (fashion illustrations, fashion magazine covers, and Hollywood celebrity portraits) further strengthen the place fashion had in Barilli's life. Turning to German fashion magazines, French Baroque fashion derived from Jeanne Lanvin's robes de style and Hollywood costumes, Milena Pavlović Barilli became the only Serbian artist to incorporate the imagery of Hollywood movie costumes in her artistic practice. Munich fashion illustrations not only bridged Serbian culture to that of Germany and the West, but also created an intermediate dialogue between fine arts, fashion, costume design, and cinema of different countries, with Barilli being the mediator of such a dialogue. The first painting the artist created was an homage

to this dialogue, representing Rudolph Valentino in his role in *The Sheikh*. By portraying a costumed Hollywood actor in the technique of the highest art form – oil on canvas – Barilli proved that fashion was an integral part of her aesthetic system and that it was crucial in her perception of cultural diversity, whether it comes to popular culture or heritage. In Paris, Barilli upgraded this repertoire with French surrealism, and the revival of Classical Antiquity in fashion design (Vionnet, Schiaparelli, Grès) and fashion photography (George Hoyningen Huene, Man Ray, Toni Frissell) of the 1930s.

Branding heritage through fashion

From her arrival in New York City in 1939, Milena Pavlović Barilli was professionally engaged as a fashion illustrator for several US fashion and lifestyle magazines, including *Harper's Bazaar*, *Town and Country*, and of course, *Vogue*. She remained the only Serbian artist who was engaged as a professional fashion illustrator for the US *Vogue*, and more so, the only national artist who realized the magazine's cover page. The cover of the 1940 April 1st issue, featuring the illustration of a wedding dress inspired by her self-portraits, paintings of Velasquez, designs of Balenciaga, and the fashion photography of Hoyningen Huene and Frissell has been used as the visual identity of both the exhibition and the accompanying publication. As the main visual of the exhibition and the most representative of Barilli's fashion work, the cover communicated the message that fashion can be equally artistic and as such develop a sense of fashion appreciation among the local audiences seeing that Serbia contributed to the fashion world as well. In press releases and publications following the exhibit, Milena Pavlović Barilli was referred to as "the only Serb who illustrated the cover of *Vogue*" which was well received by the audience and contributed to the destabilization of Barilli as a painter exclusively.



Figure 5. Milena Pavlović Barilli, *Blue Wedding Dress Model*, *Vogue USA*, April 1, 1940, ©The Gallery of Milena Pavlović Barilli, Požarevac, Serbia

Due to its multicultural character, Maison Barilli was included in the official program of European Heritage Days as the part of Novi Sad 2021 European Capital of Culture, with the European Fashion Heritage Association recognizing Barilli's fashion illustrations as European fashion heritage. In that sense, the medium of fashion became a promoter of Serbian cultural heritage internationally, causing local audiences to perceive positively a fashion exhibition they weren't used to seeing in a fine arts space as a valid and museum worthy event.

Additionally, the project, before relocating from Požarevac to Novi Sad, was presented in April 2018 at The New Research in Dress History Conference in London, UK, as the first presentation of Serbian fashion in the history of the conference.

More importantly, the complete exhibition project has significantly impacted the destabilization of the western-centrist canon of fashion. In the process, the cover done by a Serbian artist for an American fashion magazine became the branding tool of Serbian fashion expression and its visibility in the West and in fashion academia overall. As such, *Maison Barilli: Belgrade / New York* (un)intentionally became a cultural hub, affirming fashion museology, developing a network of museum collaboration, and bridging cultures.

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