

Synergy between tradition and contemporary fashion

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Abstract

The article will introduce two pilot projects carried out in cooperation between museums and Faculty (University of Zagreb, Faculty of Textile Technology) with the purpose of launching a course in the graduate study of Fashion Design entitled *From Cultural Heritage to Fashion Design*. The results of the first pilot project were contemporary fashion dresses inspired by Croatian lace from the 16th century, namely artifacts from the Museum of Arts and Crafts in Zagreb. The goal was to design dresses with Croatian traditional elements for Croatian cultural ambassadors working abroad. In the second project, contemporary fashion dresses were inspired by Croatian folk costumes housed in the permanent collection of the Ethnographic Museum in Zagreb. The goal was to create fashion products, so-called *fashion statements*, whose design symbolizes a form of a protest against the collapse of the Croatian textile industry. The aim of this cooperation was to remind the society of the beauty that lies in forgotten cultural heritage and to examine new ways of presenting museum artifacts.

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Introduction:

This paper will present two pilot projects which were set up in an attempt to revitalize tradition through fashion design. The fashion products that resulted from the cooperation of the Museum of Arts and Crafts and the Faculty of Textile Technology (University of Zagreb, Croatia) represent the synergy between tradition and fashion. Inspiration through traditional culture is nothing new to the world of fashion. Inspired by various traditional cultures, Yves Saint Laurent went on to design a series of collections in the 1960s and 70s that would later become known as *Imaginary travel*.¹ Contemporary fashion designers such as Alexander McQueen (Fall/Winter 2003 *Scanners*), John Galliano (Fall/Winter 2009, Fall/Winter 2018 women's collection for Maison Margiela) and Hussein Chalayan also created fashion inspired by tradition. However, Japanese designers Kenzo Takada, Rei Kawakubo, Issey Miyake and Yohji Yamamoto brought the most significant oriental influence to Western fashion from the 1980s onwards.

Tradition-inspired fashion has a long-standing history. The *robe à la polonoise* or *polonoise* worn on the French court in the 18th century was inspired by Polish national

costume. In 1911, Paul Poiret (1879 – 1944) used traditional garments of the East (caftans, turbans and harem pants) for his theme party *Thousand and second night* or *Arabian night*, which he later reinterpreted in his fashion collection in 1913. Elsa Schiaparelli (1890-1973) created Indian-influenced (*sari*) gowns and wraps for her fall collection in 1935, inspired by a visit from the fourteen-year-old Indian princess Maharani Karam of Kapurthala to Paris.

At the intersection of Eastern and Western trade routes, the territory of present-day Croatia was subjected to multiple changes in political and governmental systems. These circumstances made the territory of Croatia a place where different cultural influences blended to form a traditional culture based on the fusion of styles and heritages as seen in the present-day folklore costumes. For example, a small Dalmatian town of Makarska saw the rise of an affluent social class in the 18th century, whose members were captains of merchant ships and their families. Female members of these families followed French fashion trends and used their lavish clothes to showcase their financial power and social status. The *alla turca* style was first accepted only after Madame Pompadour (1721-1764) promoted it on the French court, despite the fact that the Ottoman Empire conquered the neighboring territories of Bosnia at the end of the 15th century and their dress culture and garments such as caftans, turbans and harem pants were well-known to the Dalmatian population (Simončić 2017, 65-95).

The 19th century also marks interesting attempts in the fashion industry as a result of fusion between anti-fashion and fashion (Simmel 1904, Flugel 1950, Polhemus and Procter 1978). In Croatian history, Salamon Berger was registered as the first director of the Ethnographic Museum in Zagreb. Working as a traveling salesman originally from Slovakia, he was fascinated with the beauty of Croatian traditional culture and dedicated himself to manufacturing fashion garments based on the synergy between fashion and tradition. Decorative ribbons, fabrics and garments inspired by Croatian traditional culture were produced under the brand name *S.B. Industrie*, i.e. *S.B. Industrie Nationale Croate* later on. The industry was active from 1885 to 1911. Since Croatia was then a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the designs were advertised as Hungarian fashion products in the foreign press. Notables such as Madame Paquin and Paul Poiret purchased textiles with traditional Croatian motifs, while Salamon Berger Industrie warehouses were spread worldwide (Simončić 2011, 212-232). Unfortunately, the industry was forced to shut down when Berger was denied support in the form of government incentives

Figure 1. A dress from *Maison Paquin* (Paris), made from textile products of *Salamon Berger Industrie*. Photography is kept in the *Ethnographic Museum, Zagreb*, EMZ 4/3



The Question of Identity

Based on past experiences and contemporary trends, the idea of two pilot projects evolved at the Faculty of Textile Technology (University of Zagreb, Croatia) and was implemented in cooperation with several museums across Croatia. The primary attempt was to observe clothing as a form of visual code and question its role as the carrier of individual or national identity. According to Fred Davis (Davis 1994) and Malcolm Barnard (Barnard 2014), garments are the focal point of interest in the relationship between identity and fashion. According to Malcolm, the one function that all fashion and clothing performs is that of communication. This may be explained by saying that everything we wear on, or do to our bodies and ourselves in the form of clothing, fashion or any other form of adornment, represents ideas, values and beliefs that we hold as individual members of various cultural groups. Fashion is a form of communication, which involves representation (Malcolm 2014, 53-54). Identity is also an indicator of difference (Malcolm 2014, 96-97).

Clothes can thus be observed as a dress language i.e. a visual code used by both an individual and a particular community. This can be best observed on examples of traditional clothing practices. However, the *national signature* that emerges as a result of a particular socio-cultural climate and continuity can partially be recognized in fashion as well. For example, from the 14th century onward, French fashion has become the paragon of imagination and creativity, American fashion is a synonym for casualness, Danish for minimalism and Japanese for orientalism from the Western perspective, with the focus on a modernized approach to traditional techniques in the textile industry. However, it should be noted that fashion products here are not referred to as a dress code of national identity. Namely in the present day, it is difficult to define what is autochthonous and what is assimilated and reinterpreted through the past in traditional folklore costumes, let alone in fashion design.

If we observe that Croatian traditional culture has assimilated different influences throughout the past, having emerged at the intersection of the East and West, we can conclude that this relatively small present-day territory is home to a wide array of different clothing traditions and heritages, making the autochthonous *Croatian* clothing identity difficult to define. This transnational territory gave rise to the emergence of hybrid cultural forms and traditional heritage across generations (Čapo Žmegač 2006, 2007, Čapo 2013). They are truly a wonderful example of blended influences, mutual respect and acceptance of different cultures.

Playing with the question of national identity through clothing is often used for commercial purposes. In such processes, certain historical facts and presumptions are emphasized to the point where they are imposed as indisputable truths (Čapo 2018, 71-86) whereby these garments tend to border on good taste or kitsch. Therefore, the primary intention of these two pilot projects was not to design folkloric costume garments, but fashion products that tend to reinterpret Croatian traditional heritage in a way that would spark interest and bring it closer to the observer, using fashion design as a tool of accomplishment. The beauty of traditional manufacturing techniques, color intensity, the need for ornaments and lavishness can be observed in all cultures across the world. Visual art is a universal language to all civilizations, an intricate need of all cultures and individuals in their artistic and ritual pursuit of beauty. The encounter of fashion and tradition slows down the fast pace of our lifestyle imposed by short-term trends and brings us back to our historical sources, which tradition tends to preserve and

pass on in its continuity. Tradition allows us to learn about the beauty of Croatian cultural heritage and revalorize it through fashion design.

In the course of this cooperation, museums functioned as laboratories for experimental research and venues for the presentation of finished products and *education* of visitors. Fashion design and *story-telling* were used as a starting point of this inverse path to revalorization of traditional culture, which inspired readymade fashion products. The emphasis was placed on manners of presentation, which would best stimulate the observer's interest. While the first project *Lepoglava lace on fashion garments* (2008) was set up in order to design clothes for the wives of cultural attaches worldwide and to implement a modernized approach to lace in fashion design, the second project *EX-VONIA* (2018) represents the so-called *fashion statement*.

First pilot project – reinterpretation and modernization of bobbin lace from Lepoglava, Croatia (2008)

Traditional lacemaking techniques dictated by the fashion market are gradually becoming extinct, while museum artifacts trapped in display cases and collections fail to convey more than a single aspect of their value to the observer. This is precisely the way visitors are presented with lace from Lepoglava, a small town in the northwest of Croatia. The production of bobbin lace dates back to the 16th century and has been traditionally passed on to this day. In her text on Lepoglava lace from 1999, Thessa Schoenholzer Nichols warns that its revitalization would only be possible in haute couture. She gives the example of the couture embroidery atelier *Lesage* in Paris which creates lace handcrafts for Chanel (Schoenholzer 2000, 31–43). Namely, the production of lace is extremely expensive and barely profitable in the realm of the small-scale local fashion market, since there are no fashion companies in Croatia; there are only fashion design ateliers, which design haute couture, sold in the so-called concept stores and fashion dressmaker salons.

The pilot project "Lepoglava lace on fashion garments" was set up for the twelfth international lace festival in Lepoglava in 2008, thereby indicating the leading potential of Lepoglava in lacemaking for the demands of small-scale contemporary fashion collections. The realization of the project was brought forth in cooperation among the Faculty of Textile Technology (Zagreb, Croatia), museums, lace makers from Lepoglava and the DTR factory (Domestic garment factory and textile confection, Ltd) from Zagreb.

The students of the Faculty of Textile Technology were assigned a task to design functional contemporary garments inspired by Lepoglava lace for women working as cultural ambassadors on the promotion of Croatian culture worldwide. During the project, the students acquired basic knowledge of European and Croatian lacemaking and the application of lace in contemporary fashion design. An expert panel was appointed to select five designs from students bidding in the contest. A workshop under the mentorship of contemporary artist and fashion designer Silvio Vujičić was set up in order to elaborate the initial designs. On their field trip to Lepoglava, the students were introduced to traditional bobbin lacemaking techniques thanks to the association of Lepoglava lace makers, who manufactured various lace designs according to students' lace patterns.

Students' designs were realized at the factory DTR, including the design of the cutting patterns, the construction and making up of parts and manual finishing (appliqué techniques, chemical finishing, wrinkling and additional pleating). In addition, the factory's intense business cooperation with foreign enterprises was used to present the models on markets abroad. This was also a window of opportunity for the town of Lepoglava to establish possible cooperation in lacemaking for special small-scale editions of garments tailored for particular customers, thus contributing to their preservation and valorization in the context of the contemporary fashion industry².

At the opening ceremony of the 12th international lace festival in Lepoglava, the garments were presented in a showroom to special town guests, the wives of cultural attaches and female members of the Rotary Club. Since the garments were primarily intended for ambassadors' wives as cultural promoters and women working in culture in general, especially employees of the Croatian Ministry of Culture, their interest in purchase validated the premise of the project and its ultimate success. A fashion show for a wider audience was organized successively.

Fashion garments with traditional Lepoglava lace were presented at the international European exhibition *I Love Inter/National Fashion* (2009, Ljubljana, Slovenia), further on the exhibition titled *Cro art & craft expo 2* (2010, New York), and finally on the exhibition *Dizajn 09/10* (2010, Zagreb). As exhibits, these fashion products were presented on dress forms, accompanied by a short text about the designer and raw materials used, and a video presenting the sources of inspiration (localities, history, tradition and existing artifacts). Today, the models are a part of the permanent yet unformed exhibition of the museum dedicated to Lepoglava lace. Through this pilot project, the museum became a key venue for the interaction of science, art, education and presentation. It was used to present the potential of artifacts as sources of inspiration, to set up workshops on traditional manufacturing techniques, to promote fashion products through exhibitions and to organize lectures on advantages and disadvantages of the project.



Left: Figure 2. Traditional laces from Lepoglava, Croatia.

Right: Figure 3. Model from project Lepoglava lace on fashion garments, 2008. Author student Morana Krklec (University of Zagreb, Faculty of Textile Technology), mentor Silvio Vujičić (artist and fashion designer), photo made by prof. Jasminka Končić, mr.art.

Second pilot project: Clothing as fashion statement and web platform - Repository of Croatian Contemporary Fashion, When Fashion meets Tradition (2018)

In 2018, the fashion collection titled *EX – VONIA* by student Damir Begović, designed under the mentorship of Associate Professor Jasminka Končić (Faculty of Textile Technology, University of Zagreb, Croatia), won the prestigious fashion award at the festival of young fashion designers in New Zealand (iD International Emerging Designers Show, New Zealand). The title of the collection was derived from the name of the designer's homeland region Slavonia in the eastern part of Croatia. In the past, Slavonia was home to a thriving textile industry with the cultivation of silk, wool, flax and hemp. Unfortunately, the decline of numerous clothing and textile factories that started in the 1980s reached its climax with the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the transition from a communist to capitalist social system. By using the portmanteau word *Ex – Vonia* for the title of his collection, the designer addresses the devastation of the region followed by the forced economic migration of the indigenous population and the gradual extinction of cultural heritage. For these reasons, the collection was inspired by traditional Slavonian manufacturing and ornamental techniques (gold thread embroidery). These fashion products can be observed as the designer's materialized *public outcry* and angry social critique of the situation in Slavonia, which he himself was forced to leave. In the course of their studies, students are introduced with a similar type of agency by Alexander McQueen (1969-2010) in his so-called *fashion statement* collections such as *Highland Rape* (fall/winter 1995–96), collection *Joan* (fall 1998) and *Widows of Culloden* (Fall/Winter 2006-7), through which he addresses the troubled relationship between Scotland and England and gives voice to martyrs and victims of different historical and political systems.

The application of elements from Croatian historical heritage in the *Ex – Vonia* collection was meant to spark interest in traditional techniques and motifs among the younger population. Precisely this type of approach and concept paves the way for potential future reinterpretations of the traditional and historical cultural heritage of Croatia. In the course of education at the Faculty of Textile Technology (University of Zagreb, Croatia) tradition is often observed as the starting point in the design of contemporary fashion collections. The reinterpretation of cultural heritage needs to be carried out harmoniously and gracefully, avoiding the realization of fashion products in the kitsch category. In the case of the *Ex – Vonia* collection, the design process started by examining the permanent exhibition of the Ethnographic Museum in Zagreb. The focal points of his research were exhibited clothing and textile artifacts from the Slavonian region. Upon the selection of a particular artifact, the designer conducted a historical art analysis in order to define distinctive features i.e. details which would be reinterpreted. The designer decided to put the emphasis on ornamental techniques and traditional forms



Left: Figure 4. Ceremonial traditional woman clothing from Bizovac, Slavonia, Croatia.

Right: Figure 5. Model from the collection *ex – vonia*, inspired by the traditional clothing form from Slavonia, 2018. Author student Damir Begović, mentor prof. Jasminka Končić, mr.art. University of Zagreb, Faculty of Textile Technology, photo made by Darija Cikač.

The designer then embarked on a field trip in search of localities in Slavonia where the elderly were still actively practicing gold and silver thread embroidery, decorating leather with small mirrors and pierced embroidery the so-called “šlingeraj” (germ. *schlingen*), meaning punch stitch embroidery.

This field research resulted in establishing cooperation and a data base, i.e. a list of potential associates in future projects whose skills are indispensable in an attempt to reinterpret and preserve cultural heritage in danger of extinction. Therefore, the models of the *Ex-Vonia* collection represent highly artistic memorial records of the past and present, and need to be observed as a form of *fashion statement*.



Figure 6. Traditional leather waistcoat “kožuh”, decorated with small mirrors from Đakovština, Slavonia, Croatia, 2018.



Figure 7. Detailed of model from collection *ex – vonia*, 2018, leather decorated with small mirrors (traditional techniques, nurturing in Slavonia, Croatia). Author student Damir Begović, mentor prof. Jasminka Končić, mr.art. University of Zagreb, Faculty of Textile Technology, photo made by Darija Cikač.

Figure 8. Model from the collection *ex – vonia*, inspired by the traditional clothing form and decorative techniques from Slavonia, 2018. Author student Damir Begović, mentor prof. Jasminka Končić, mr.art. University of Zagreb, Faculty of Textile Technology, photo made by Darija Cikač.

Apart from the awarded fashion show at iD International Emerging Designers Show in 2018 in New Zealand, the collection was presented in two Zagreb exhibitions (Museum of Arts and Crafts 2018 and TTF Gallery 2018).

This collection also indicated the need to set up a web platform (still under construction) within the course titled *From Cultural Heritage to Fashion Design* at the Faculty of Textile Technology (University of Zagreb, Croatia). The purpose of this web platform is to take the *inverse path* in archiving and presenting Croatian cultural heritage and tradition; from contemporary fashion to tradition as a source of inspiration behind fashion collections. The web platform is titled *Repository of Croatian Contemporary Fashion – When Fashion meets Tradition* and it aims to spark the observer's interest and affection towards the traditional culture. Four contemporary models or fashion statements from the *Ex – Vonia* collection are presented in this manner. A click on the photographs of all models provides basic information about the collection and its name. By clicking on a photograph of a particular model, additional interfaces or drop menus pop up, providing information on traditional culture as inspirational source, geographical locations, existing analog artifacts in private or museum collections, old photographs, traditional manufacturing techniques and information on their practitioners. Since these craftsmen

are mainly members of the elderly generations, the setting up of the platform indicated the need to make detailed digital records of the manufacturing process with the aim of preserving and passing on traditional techniques threatened by extinction. This platform is still under construction and its main purpose is aimed at educating students of fashion design. Moreover, it also shows great potential as a high-quality tool for presenting Croatian traditional culture to museum visitors and to all interested in Croatian cultural heritage via mobile application.

Conclusion

The Faculty of Textile Technology intends to foster close cooperation with the museums for the purpose of educating future fashion designers through creation of fashion products inspired by traditional heritage. A special emphasis is placed on the development of the course titled *From Cultural Heritage to Fashion Design*, and related activities such as exhibitions, public discussions, workshops and conferences. This further indicates the need for setting up the web platform *Repository of Croatian Contemporary Fashion – When Fashion meets Tradition* as a space for virtual presentation of fashion inspired by traditional Croatian cultural heritage with the purpose of its preservation.

Endnotes

¹ Exhibition of *Yves Saint Laurent Voyages extraordinaires*, 1 June to 20 July 2009 In: Lieu de l'exposition: Centre Culturel Banco do Brasil, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Curator: Pierre Bergé.

¹ The CEO the DTR factory (Domestic garment factory and textile confection, Ltd) set up a meeting of Lepoglava town representatives, lace makers, employees of the tourist center, students and tailors who participated in the project. In her opening speech, the main designer of the DTR Company pointed out the interest of foreign enterprises in the designed garments and the necessity for the town of Lepoglava to devise a market strategy in order to revitalize traditional craftsmanship and make it competitive in terms of potential demand and supply.

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