THE AMBIVALENCE OF MUSEUM DISCOURSES ABOUT "THE OTHER" IN SLOVENIA DURING THE NON-ALIGNED MOVEMENT: BUILDING NATIONAL IDENTITY AND CLAIMING BELONGING TO THE CIVILIZED WEST

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Abstract: ***The author focuses on the exhibition narratives that were produced at the Museum of Non-European Cultures which operated between 1964 and 2001 as a dislocated unit of the Slovene Ethnographic Museum. Situated in the baroque Goričane mansion near Ljubljana, Slovenia, it was the first institution in Yugoslavia dedicated to collecting and presenting non-European ethnological heritage. Through its own and visiting exhibitions the Goričane Museum shaped various narratives about the other. Some served to build affinity with other continents and their people, others to move away from them, closer to the developed West. The author examines the exhibition narratives that helped shape national identity and support the idea of belonging to the civilized West.***

Keywords: ***Slovene ethnographic museum, non-European***

Slovenian territory has a long and diverse history of contact with other continents and peoples. Individuals from present-day Slovenia have served as missionaries, diplomats, explorers, engineers, and sailors in the framework of the Austrian Empire and subsequent to the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy,[1] of which

[1] The Austrian historian Walter Sauer (2012) convincingly illuminates the role of the Austrian Empire and later the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy in the colonial project, both at the level of individuals and at the level of state and private institutions.

they were a part (Šmitek 1986, 1995; Frelih 2009, 2010; Marinac 2017), as well as in the racialized efforts of overseas colonial empires (see Frelih 2007). These contacts contributed to the construction of knowledge about the geographical and cultural characteristics of distant places and people, which Edward Said (1996) referred to as "imaginative geography". The image of the Other was also shaped by the imperial and colonial literature that circulated in the Slovenian space (Šmitek 1986; 1988), as well as by the display of individuals from other continents in different settings (Ličen 2018; Mesarič 2021), reporting in newspapers – especially Catholic – and in numerous travelogues (Šmitek 1988; Frelih and Koren 2016; Jelnikar and Motoh 2021; Polajnar 2021, 2022). A significant share was also contributed by acquiring and exhibiting objects from non-European peoples in museums and seminaries (Motoh 2020).

Acquiring non-European objects for museum displays began soon after the first museum in Slovenia, the Carniola Provincial Museum, was founded in 1821. Its purpose was to present the history, statistics, natural history, technology, and physics of the Carniola region to show the diversity of the multinational Austrian Empire. In addition to preserving the remains of the past, the museum's mission was to educate the audience about patriotism and to emphasize cultural differences with other nations (Jezernik 2013: 169–170).[2] To do so, the Carniola Provincial Museum, in addition to other types of objects, has acquired ethnographic artifacts, both local and from different continents, since its foundation. Non-European collections were not collected in a systematic or planned manner, but rather as a result of coincidences, based on the interests and opportunities of individuals with different backgrounds who worked in non-European countries for various objectives. Both non-European and Slovene ethnographic objects were showcased to a limited extent, and museum curators gave little attention to their study until the Ethnographic Museum was separated from the National Museum, the successor to the Carniola Regional Museum, in 1923 (Hudales 2003: 81–82). The decades that followed, especially after World War II, were mainly focused on acquiring Slovenian ethnological collections in the spirit of salvage ethnography. Museum curators began to focus more on non-European material only since the middle of the 1950s.

[2] Although ideas for an ethnographic museum that would represent the characteristics of the entire Slovene territory appeared at the beginning of the 20th century, they could not be realized in the framework of the Austrian state (Jezernik 2009: 24–25).

Museum representations of non-European ethnographic collections in Slovenia reached a historical peak during the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), which was formally launched in September 1961 at a summit in Belgrade, with socialist Yugoslavia among its founding members. In the context of the Cold War, the movement enabled political and economic cooperation, as well as exchange in the fields of education and culture, for many newly independent countries. After breaking free from colonial rule, they found themselves between the Western and Eastern blocs and tried to establish a platform for their voice to be heard in the international arena (Jakovina 2011). New alliances also facilitated the acquisition of new non-European museum collections, the organization of international traveling exhibitions from developing countries, and the cooperation of international students, who came to study in Yugoslavia, on collection interpretation (Palaić 2023).

According to Serbian historian Nemanja Radonjić (2023: 14), there is a lack of scholarship on representations of the Other in the Balkans and Eastern Europe, which is especially true for museums, as knowledge institutions generate ideas about the Other. Moreover, we need to explore these ideas because of the ambiguous position of the region itself. As noted by Radonjić (2023: 14), who focuses on the Yugoslav representations of Africa, in the Balkans "the relations of power and knowledge are not as unambiguous and clear as in the West Africa relation". The Balkans were, in a similar fashion as non-European parts of the world, defined as "the opposite of civilization, peace, and development" (Radonjić 2023: 15; see also Todorova 2001); however, at the same time, stereotypical and Eurocentric representations about other continents and people were generated there (see Gingrich 1998; Baskar 2011; Jezernik 2012).

The period of non-alignment is especially interesting for analysing a museum discourse on the Other. At that time, in the 19th and early 20th centuries, ideas about non-European spaces and people, often characterized in particular notions of lower development, static and immutable nature, and cultural hierarchy, were disrupted by Yugoslav non-aligned foreign policy principles of friendship and solidarity with the Global South. This has contributed to ambivalent museum discourses reflected in the exhibition narratives at the Slovene Ethnographic Museum's satellite branch, the Museum of Non-European Cultures in Goričane. The Goričane museum was established in 1964 to present the museum's non-European collections and host guest exhibitions from other continents. Until 1988, when Goričane Castle was temporarily closed for renovations, more than 80 exhibitions were prepared there. They showcased

the collections of Slovenian collectors, which were already the property of the museum, acquired both before and during the NAM, as well as private collections on loan for the exhibitions. Almost half of all exhibitions during this period were the result of international cooperation. Most international exhibitions were mediated by the embassies or governments of developing countries within the framework of international cultural and scientific cooperation, and they were prepared by museums in these countries or by commissions, scientific institutes, or other bodies designated for this task (Palaić 2023). The most important for the operation of the Goričane museum were Boris Kuhar, the then-director of the museum, who was in charge of the organizational and financial aspects of the museum's exhibition program, and Pavla Štrukelj, the curator, who was responsible for professional work with non-European collections.

The ambivalence of museum discourses is evident in the interweaving of five narratives that characterized the presentation of the Other in the time of the Non-Aligned Movement. Those narratives reflected and strengthened but at the same time undermined the political and cultural tendencies in the country. On the one hand, the museum thematized the significance of the national liberation struggle, both for Yugoslavia and other members of the Non-Aligned Movement or developing countries, which was frequently highlighted as a shared experience among the countries. This narrative was emphasized in the museum, especially in the first decade of its operation, although it could still be seen during the 1980s. In the mid-1970s, emphasis on non-alignment and anti-colonialism, as well as the role of culture and art in the fight against colonialism, began to replace it. On the other hand, the museum contributed to the strengthening of Slovene national identity and the formation of hierarchies between nations. It accomplished this by emphasizing the importance of Slovenian collectors, whom it ranked alongside European researchers, thereby establishing the proximity of the Slovene land to the "civilized" West. Additionally, a strong museum narrative contributed to exoticizing and stereotyping the Other. However, since the mid-1970s, Eurocentric concepts have occasionally been undermined, for example in media coverage of exhibitions or in scientific papers, with appeals for a shift beyond Eurocentrism and European standards of understanding other cultures.

The museum apparently employed contradictory narratives to generate both proximity and distance between visitors and the people whose material culture was displayed. Furthermore, collaboration with young people from other continents who came to Yugoslavia to study additionally illuminated the

museum's ambivalence toward the Other. Despite some display narratives that contributed to the exotification of other peoples, foreign students were invited to the museum to share their knowledge of the artefacts in the collections. Some students also sold objects from their home countries to the museum and participated in an accompanying program during exhibitions that allowed visitors to interact directly with them and their interpretations of the exhibited artefacts. Occasionally, Pavla Štrukelj also worked with foreign student organizations to lend museum objects for their displays. This was clearly an advanced approach at a time when participation, inclusion, and community collaboration had not yet been widely discussed (Palaić 2023: 159–160).

Given the complexities of museum discourses and practices at the time, I will focus in this paper on how the Goričane museum contributed to the exoticization of the Other and placed Slovenian collectors in the same framework as Western European researchers. Both discourses positioned Slovenian land within the Western civilizational framework while also elevating it within the cultural development hierarchy. I will analyse concrete examples based on a review of scientific and professional articles about museum collections, exhibition catalogues, and articles in various newspapers, as well as a review of the accessible archive kept by SEM and the personal archive of a museum curator Pavla Štrukelj. Štrukelj's writings make up a sizable portion of the texts that have been analysed because, at the time, she was the only museum professional who wrote extensively about how the museum had handled non-European artefacts. By deconstructing museum narratives, I aim to contribute to the recognition and disclosure of colonial continuity in social practices and mental habits in the region, which, according to anthropologist Erica Lehrer and sociologist Joanna Wawrzyniak (2023), is one of the key elements in the decolonization of museums in Eastern Europe.

Exoticization of the Other: Consolidating the higher position on the scale of development

The Museum of Non-European Cultures in Goričane featured a variety of original exhibitions that included 19th- and early-20th-century perceptions of foreign places and cultures. They were a product of the colonial knowledge that was disseminated in the Slovene territory through imperial literature, as well as Slovene participation in European scientific networks and colonial enterprises. These conceptions, which were based on differentiating mechanisms of time, space,

and perception of who a human being is, emphasized distinct progress among world cultures and positioned the European ones at the top of this hierarchy. Moreover, they denied non-Western peoples the ability to govern and speak for themselves.

The category of time played an important role in establishing these ideas. Ariella Aïsha Azoulay (2019: 167–169), a scholar of visual culture and photography, argues that non-European peoples were cut off from their ways of life, which became viewed as a relic of the past. This has been done, among other things, by removing objects from the community and then collecting and preserving them in museums, as living knowledge was commonly performed through using objects. Indigenous life systems were characterized as a thing of the past that needed to be conserved. The result of this procedure was that entire peoples were denied their coevalness, which prevented them from engaging in theoretical discourse (Fabian 1983: 157) – in creating knowledge about their own existential dimension. Denying coevalness led to a search for primary and original cultural elements, which were thought to be disappearing as a result of advancements in technology or interactions between locals and Western colonists. The attribution of ahistoricity to non-European populations was also linked to the assumption that history requires a linear and cumulative sense of time that allows the observer to isolate the past as a separate entity. Since these populations were said not to have an adequate sense of time or evidence (sometimes not enough reason to be able to do so), they and their narratives were denied epistemic validity (Trouillot 1995: 7).

In her scientific writings, Pavla Štrukelj often emphasized that cultures progressed from less to more developed. According to Štrukelj (1980/1982: 127; 1977: 26–27), we can learn and understand the developmental aspect of cultures by studying non-European collections, which she saw as an important reason for the museum to continuously supplement them. Additionally, she wrote extensively about the importance of displaying original and authentic objects obtained before Westerners changed local traditions. These narratives were centred primarily on missionary collections that originated in the 19th and early 20th centuries, and were also summarized in newspaper reports about museum exhibitions. Štrukelj wrote about missionary Ignacij Knoblehar's collection gathered in the middle of the 19th century in modern-day Sudan and South Sudan, claiming that it was highly interesting from an ethnological perspective because the objects were still authentic and original at the time of acquisition (Štrukelj 1967a: 166). In her writing about the missionary Frederic Baraga's

collection acquired among Ottawa and Chippewa people in North America in the 1830s, she drew attention to the loss of authenticity of objects due to the influence of Western settlers:

> The culture of today's Indian tribes is changing more and more, despite the fact that the traditional ancestral way of life continues to develop in certain territories. The development of general American life and modern technology in the economic field also penetrates the Indian population. The young Indian generation is changing its way of life, getting used to modern life, and abandoning the former simple original way more and more. Many studies to date, carried out by American and European researchers on Indian groups, have shown many changes. Thus, we see that the Indians today are different in appearance because their former original costume is disappearing more and more. Many of them dress modernly, like other American residents; everyday and festive clothes are bought in stores. Young Indians are educated in various schools; and parents introduce their children to the modern way of life.
> (Štrukelj 1972/1973: 140)

Her writing directs readers to establish a dichotomy between the "traditional", which is original and authentic, and the modern, which is associated with white immigrants. Modernity is attributed to the latter, and they are understood as those who brought development or progress to the locals (see Traditional 2018: 140). Due to the modernization brought by the Westerners, the old and authentic is disappearing so the original objects must be protected (compare Azoulay 2019: 19-20). With the selected narrative, Pavla Štrukelj missed an important opportunity to present these exchanges in a more nuanced way, especially to problematize the destructive consequences of the colonialists' actions on other continents. She didn't write about the exploitation of local resources and people but rather characterized Westerners as being modern and advanced. Both marking those objects that were the result of the (violent) exchange between the colonized and the colonizers as less important to collect or less valuable and simultaneously perceiving indigenous cultures as lagging behind, as they had to be "modernized" and "civilized", placed the formerly colonized peoples in a doubly subordinate position.

Pavla Štrukelj also understood indigenous communities as static, as frozen in time. The sociologist and activist Hodan Warsame (2018: 82) defined the museum's presentation of locals as stuck in space and time as one of the

approaches to knowledge construction about these peoples. Objects and photographs, and sometimes also descriptions of cultural practices, displayed at museums, date back to colonial times when this material was collected. But most of the time, museum representations do not mention the wider context of colonialism and its aftermath, and they omit the description of change and the current situation the people in question live in today, left alone including their own voices and perspectives. Pavla Štrukelj, however, when dealing with individual elements of material culture, does present a developmental aspect, as mentioned above, but she uses this narrative to distinguish between more- and less-developed peoples:

> In our museums, these older ethnological collections represent important historical material, which today is valuable and necessary when researching the way of life of nations; some of them have achieved a high level of civilization, while people in developing countries have a different development of life forms.
> (Štrukelj 1977: 27)

With these words, Štrukelj directed the readers towards a hierarchical evaluation of cultures. As many decolonial scholars have pointed out, Western Europe constructed itself as a space of rationality, progress, and civilization, while other continents were defined as the opposite. This narrative allowed Europeans to treat both non-European space and peoples as objects of knowledge and domination (Quijano 2000: 555). Western Europeans imagine themselves as the pinnacle of civilization, as the only society that is the bearer, creator, and protagonist of modernity. Philosopher and essayist Sylvia Wynter (2003: 264) put the key question of who or what a person is at the centre of the processes of creating the Other. The exclusion of individuals who did not meet the concept of a human was created by a sequence of discursive and institutional inventions that constructed a definition of a human through dualisms: Christian–pagan, rational–irrational, primitive–civilized. This framework manifested itself in concrete actions, such as the mission of Christianization, the civilizational mission, and the formation of a racially inferior Other, all of which rejected universal humanity and provided ideological legitimation for a colonial project (Wynter 2003).

Primitiveness was also discussed in reporting on the exhibition *Culture of the Black Tribes along the White Nile in the 19th century*, which opened in 1968 in the Goričane museum. The display presented the Sudan and South Sudan

collection of Ignacij Knoblehar, a missionary from the mid-19th century. In the daily newspaper *Delo*, journalist Janez Zadnikar (1968: 5) described his view of what a visitor noticed when looking at the exhibited objects: "Expedience of form, [the] ingenuity of manufacturers [...], the firmness of the products [...], submission to the mythological purpose [...], and perhaps the strong will of the former savages to survive." V. V., a journalist for the daily *Večer*, emphasized the immutability and static nature of the peoples living along the Nile River Basin, noting that the message of the collection, according to him, lay in their struggle for survival. This suggests that he attempted to soften his stereotypical descriptions of the peoples in question:

> The culture of the black tribes in the area depicted in our exhibition probably did not undergo any major changes (the objects on display are from the middle of the 19th century). But no matter how we look at the collection, we are constantly learning about the ingenious efforts of tribes and clans – of man in general – to strengthen his life and to find the strength with which to preserve life.
> (V. V. 1968: 8)

In the daily *Večer*, journalist V. V. emphasized primitiveness again in 1969, writing about the traveling exhibition *Chilean Folk and Applied Art*: "This time [the exhibition] is about folk art as it developed in the area of the present Republic of Chile and which in its content design has all the signs characteristic of the lively spiritual feeling of primitive and of the most primitive peoples" (V. V. 1969a). He also established a difference between the technological and spiritual development of peoples from other continents:

> The low degree of civilization, which is almost the sole external factor that guides us when reaching conclusions about primitiveness, has created in non-European peoples a unique inwardness toward man himself. Such an inversion is apparent in the entire culture of man and nation, which has become inwardly sensitive while maintaining its outer form. Within the context of this fluctuation, special processes occurred that developed among primitive peoples a feeling for small things, a feeling for great artistic inspiration, which manifested itself in every everyday and useful product as a human confession imbued with spirit and sensitivity. It makes little difference here whether we appreciate African ebony statues, Polynesian masks, or Indian textiles.
> (V. V. 1969a)

In another article, the same author stressed the hierarchy between African and Asian cultures, ranking the art of Asian nations, such as China, Japan, Indonesia, and India higher (V. V. 1969b). Regardless of their position on the scale of development, these discourses created and maintained a divide between museum visitors and the peoples whose material culture was displayed. They conveyed the impression that museum visitors belonged in a developed, civilized world, and gave them the feeling of being able to observe the Other and draw conclusions about their ways of life. This narrative was important for establishing Slovene identity alongside developed Western Europe, as it attempted to exempt the Slovenian territory from the conceptualization of the Balkans, which for so long have been filled with imagined representations and attributions of otherness by the West (see Todorova 2001; Jezernik 2011). It also helped to legitimize the museum's work, as the museum was presented as carrying out the important task of preserving "traditional" and "authentic" artefacts, while also allowing for learning about other peoples and their development. Narratives that placed Slovenian collectors closer to Western scholars and collectors served the same objective of establishing distance between Slovenes and peoples from other continents, as well as helping strengthen Slovenia's position in a civilized, Western world.

Emphasizing the role of Slovenian collectors: Strengthening national identity

Pavla Štrukelj's professional and scientific writings focused primarily on 19th-century collectors, most of whom were missionaries. Despite her assertion (Štrukelj 1991) that it is critical to understand how, when, and why the objects were collected, my reading indicates that the necessity of investigating acquisition remained at the declarative level. Her fairly generic statement of her Slovenian compatriots' collecting habits further supports this:

> Numerous sources attest to the fact that historical collectors were more intrigued by the way of life of African, Asian, and other inhabitants than by their exoticism. Many of them conducted extensive research not only on a nation's general cultural traits but also on the origins of uncommon living forms, the structure of society, or a particular social order within a group.
> (Štrukelj 1977: 27)

This remark emphasizes collectors' curiosity about the social structure and way of life of the society in which they worked, as well as the concept of discovering unusual and distinctive cultural qualities, which again alludes to a Eurocentric perspective. When investigating collecting procedures, it is also critical to pay attention to what collectors did not include in their collection. Pavla Štrukelj casually mentions missionary brutality:

> Baraga especially made a name for himself in the field of science. He researched the Native American language and studied the Chippewa culture. Unfortunately, he was such a passionate Christian missionary that he took old religious Indian sculptures away from the Indians. Incidentally, we mention that there is no object in the museum collection that illustrates an Indian deity.
> (Štrukelj 1972/1973: 119)

Pavla Štrukelj did not explain how Baraga, in his enthusiasm for Christianization, destroyed all objects related to the locals' beliefs,[3] and how this loss of the tangible world affected the local people's connection to their spiritual world. Instead of addressing collection methods and the broader historical context that facilitated the missionaries' activities among locals, as well as their repercussions, she praised them, highlighting their pioneering and sacrifice. She formulated the pioneering of the missionary Baraga as follows:

> Frederic Baraga was the first Slovenian missionary in the land of the Chippewa and Ottawa Indians and our first researcher of these groups. He was also among the first researchers of the Indian language, as he wrote fundamental works in this field.
> (Štrukelj 1972/1973: 115)

Štrukelj also glorified the actions of Baraga's coworkers, missionaries Franc Pirc and Janez Čebul, portraying the villagers as lacking survival skills and the ability to protect themselves and their interests:

> Pirc tried very hard to accustom the Chippewa Indians to live culturally and manage wisely. He wrote religious readings and poems in the Indian language; like Baraga, he published a booklet about the life of the Indians and described his own experiences at length.
> (Štrukelj 1972/1973: 120)

[3] I kindly thank the curator Marko Frelih for this information.

> The missionary Janez Čebul was very popular among the Indians. He knew the Chippewa language [and] was a singer, poet, and musician. He strongly opposed the sale of spirits to the Indians and tried to obtain more rights for them from the American authorities of the time.
> (Štrukelj 1991: 170)

Missionaries in Štrukelj's work were portrayed as those who provided life lessons to the locals. Locals cannot "smartly manage" or be considered "cultured" if they do not adhere to Western customs. Therefore, the missionaries were the ones who, in addition to the true faith, gave reason to the people. The final quotation, however, demonstrates the recognition of indigenous people as victims who require Western assistance to achieve their goals. Missionary Čebul tried to obtain more rights for them, which at first glance could be understood as advocating for these people; however, such wording deprives them of the power to act, portrays them as helpless and in need of help, while at the same time denying their own struggle for their own rights.

Pavla Štrukelj also wrote extensively about the efforts of missionary Ignacij Knoblehar, who worked among the Bari, Shilluk, Nuer, Dinka, and other peoples in the territory of today's Sudan and South Sudan, from 1848 to 1857. She described the historical context of Knoblehar's missionary work:

> During Knoblehar's time, the political and economic situation in eastern Sudan was very chaotic. Especially the trade in slaves and the trade in elephant tusks, which was mainly in the hands of the Arabs, caused enormous injustices to the indigenous population. [...] Turkish and Arab traders came to the black tribes mainly to get ivory and slaves.
> (Štrukelj 1991: 170)

In describing the broader socio-political background of Knoblehar's activities among the locals, Pavla Štrukelj omitted both his involvement in Austria's colonial ambitions and his stance on the enslavement of the locals. Knoblehar recognized the importance of protecting the locals from Arab human traffickers in gaining their favour, thereby increasing the chances of his mission succeeding (Frelih 2005: 44). Knoblehar's second move was a visit to Emperor Franz Joseph I upon his return from the missionary station, with the goal of increasing missionary activity. The Emperor recognized an opportunity to conquer non-European areas in his support of Knoblehar's Nile mission; therefore,

he generously supplied financial help. Getting the Pope's support was a little more difficult for Knoblehar, possibly due to criticism of his conduct in Africa (Frelih 2005: 48–49, 54), something Štrukelj also omitted. Instead, she glorified Knoblehar's work and highlighted the dangers he had to overcome, while again emphasizing the pioneering nature of his research:

> Thus, we can say that it was the Slovenian Knoblehar who was the first European explorer who reached the farthest south into the interior of central Africa in the middle of the last century.
> (Štrukelj 1967a: 149)

The literature under consideration largely depicts the missionaries as pioneers who achieved considerable work, particularly as explorers. They are portrayed as both bearers of civilization and as agents who brought Western knowledge to the locals in an effort to better their lives. They are portrayed as active, whilst the locals are perceived as victims of wider circumstances who need help. As a result, the missionaries were portrayed as individuals who fought for the rights of the locals. However, I would like to draw attention to the fact that a more thorough explanation of the historical and social context is lacking, which would allow for a deeper comprehension of the circumstances surrounding the missionaries' work at the time and also depict the indigenous people in more formative capacities. We do not hear the words of the locals; rather, the missionaries spoke on their behalf as they introduced the locals through their works (e.g., dictionaries, language studies, and collections of local objects). There is a prevailing feeling that missionaries have the power to educate their Western compatriots about the history of those areas and the current circumstances of locals.

Exhibition catalogues and media coverage of exhibitions at the Museum of Non-European Cultures provide context for Yugoslav ambassadors' acquisitions of artefacts. Writers frequently emphasized the care, dedication, and depth of their collecting efforts, which they claimed sprang from their interest in and love for the cultures of the people among which the ambassadors served. In the introduction to the *Folk Art of Indonesia* catalogue (Kuhar 1964: 3), the then-director of the museum, Boris Kuhar, wrote that when Ambassador Dr. Aleš Bebler served in Indonesia, the Bebler couple "carefully and persistently collected objects of Indonesian folk art". He praised Bebler's collection of Indonesian textiles as one of the few in Europe.

Pavla Štrukelj (1967b: 5) emphasized the great work of Ambassador Franček Kos in his collection of ceramics in Japan: "It is due to his professional education in the field of art that he was lucky enough to collect so many beautiful original products of high artistic value." Kos began preparing an exhibition for the Museum of Non-European Cultures in Goričane, but he died suddenly before its opening. Štrukelj wrote her wish that with the exhibition "we would humbly remember him and thus repay him for the great work that he did with such joy in the distant Japanese land and with his collection enabled us to have a more correct and better understanding of the beautiful Japanese ceramic art" (Štrukelj 1967b: 5). Readers of the journal *Primorski dnevnik* could read about how:

> Franček Kos, an art historian and aesthete, together with his wife visited many ceramic masters in Japan and gathered their artworks. This painstaking effort resulted in the current display of contemporary Japanese pottery in Goričane near [the town of] Medvode.
> (D. K. 1967: 4)

Journalist Janez Zadnikar wrote in the daily paper *Delo* about Ambassador Dušan Kveder's diverse collection from several countries:

> Dušan Kveder is a prominent Slovenian collector and researcher. Wherever he went, he consistently answered his inner urge to learn about the history, culture, and art of the people he was visiting. Wherever he lived as a diplomat for an extended period of time, he tirelessly snapped photographs, collected typical instances of folk inventiveness, and thereby enriched his collection.
> (Zadnikar 1969)

Catalogue entries and media coverage of ambassadors as collectors of non-European collections are quite infrequent. They mostly highlight their collecting efforts and emphasize the breadth or significance of their collections for learning about the cultures of non-aligned nations. Except for the cases of the Bebler and Kos spouses, who visited the locals and attempted to acquire diverse and high-quality objects for their collections, the methods of acquisition are not explained in the records, which is consistent with the previous period of collecting non-European artefacts. We can also recognize a tendency to associate ambassadors with Western Europeans in their roles as explorers and collectors.

This is most obvious in the case of the Bebler collection, where the writers emphasized its value in the European space.

The rhetoric of aligning Slovene collectors and their work with Western explorers served to consolidate Slovene identity as progressive and developed, portraying them as bearers of civilization who sought to protect powerless people, as in the narratives about missionaries, or emphasizing their great enthusiasm for learning about cultures and presenting them to their compatriots, as in the context of ambassadors. These narratives never question the power relations that enabled collectors to operate on other continents in the first place; therefore, Slovene involvement in the colonial project wasn't acknowledged.

Conclusion

The era of socialist Yugoslavia and its foreign policy orientation towards the Non-Aligned Movement created new opportunities for acquiring and exhibiting non-European collections. Official discourses emphasized solidarity with distant but friendly countries, and state policies encouraged various collaborations and exchanges with them. In the field of culture, important activities took place in the Museum of Non-European Cultures in Goričane, which functioned as a dislocated unit of the Slovene Ethnographic Museum. During its operation, the Museum of Non-European Cultures acquired new collections from other continents, prepared original and traveling international exhibitions, and collaborated with various experts and foreign students on a rich accompanying program.

The Museum of Non-European Cultures employed exhibition narratives that were often ambiguous and conflicting. The museum quickly adapted to the demands of the changing social conditions, emphasizing the rhetoric of the national liberation struggle and non-alignment, which enhanced both the internal and foreign policies of socialist Yugoslavia. The displays included themes of friendship and solidarity with the non-aligned and other developing countries, as well as condemnations of colonialism and imperialism.

In addition to this discursive proximity to non-aligned and developing countries, the museum established and maintained a narrative that created a certain distance between museum visitors and peoples from other continents. This was manifested in the exoticization of the Other, the emphasis on differences and strangeness, and more importantly, the emphasis on the developmental aspect of cultures and the importance of preserving original and authentic objects. People from other continents were attributed with a static condition

and immutability prior to the arrival of white colonialists. The museum also attempted to promote a close relationship between Slovenian compatriots working in non-European countries and Western researchers and collectors, which was evident in both the presentations of collectors from earlier periods and the portrayal of Yugoslav ambassadors in countries outside of Europe.

While generating both proximity and distance between museum visitors and people from different continents whose material culture was on display, a vision of ourselves has been constructed. Slovenes were portrayed as benevolent in their interaction with developing countries, and free of colonial burdens, while also being civilized and developed compared to them. Standing alongside Western researchers and collectors reflected the idea of ideological proximity to the West and helped to strengthen Slovenia's position in a civilized, developed Western world. These ideas grew even stronger during Yugoslavia's disintegration and led to Slovenia's affiliation with the European Union and its withdrawal from the Non-Aligned Movement.

This work shed light on the complexity of the region's social reality, characterized by a space filled with imagined representations and attributions of Otherness by the West, while also being involved in the global processes and exchanges, including colonial endeavours and knowledge production about other continents and peoples. These factors significantly impact national identity-building processes and reinforce the idea that Slovenia belongs to the "developed" world. Adding to this complexity, the Yugoslav project of the Non-Aligned Movement advocated for solidarity, equality, and collaboration with other non-aligned countries while simultaneously exporting its own version of modernization, particularly to the African continent. Illuminating these complexities is especially important for ethnographic museums in the region, where discussions about decolonization occur rarely or not at all, allowing them to address post-imperial and post-socialist legacies while working with non-European collections today.

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