

## *Blonde Joke: Stereotypes We Live By* Exhibition

ETHNOGRAPHIC MUSEUM, 22 OCTOBER 2013 TO 19 OCTOBER 2014

The exhibition *Blonde Joke: Stereotypes We Live By* curated by Irena Kolbas, M.S., presented the vast area of stereotype phenomena – from their origins and development to modern pop culture and art (Fig. 1, 2/p. 347). The notion of ‘stereotype’ derives from the printing industry and it indicates the unlimited duplication of identical impressions from a matrix, corresponding to the social practice of using the particular for the general, i.e., taking one part as the determining factor for all the parts of a whole. Since the analysis of the phenomenon throughout history and in all its manifestations in current recession conditions would be an impossible venture, the author decided to choose a somewhat free interpretation. Namely, although it presents the chronological development of the phenomenon and an exceptionally narrowed set of relevant examples, the exhibition represents a personal interpretation of the author and her collaborators – artists dealing with the stereotype theme in their work.

Since European art and culture generally abound in visual representations of stereotypes, art, film, journalism and advertising contain countless examples of stereotypes. Stereotypes in art, film, journalism and advertising through history were explored for the requirements of the exhibition. A great number of visual stereotype presentation was collected through archival search and the study of internet resources. Because of the quantity of collected examples in digital form and their importance for the understanding of the stereotype phenomenon and of its spread and social impact, it was decided to show the visitors a greater number of examples of the phenomenon and permit a

degree of freedom in their perusal. A computer application was developed for the presentation of many stereotype examples in art, film, journalism and advertising. Visitors could use the application via a computer in the exhibition and on the Museum web page. We endeavoured to encourage the interest of the visitors, young ones in particular, in such a multi-medial approach by providing a state-of-the-art touch screen.

The exhibition did not need to, and could not, present the full historical development of the stereotype and all its manifestations; instead, it was designed as a range of specific topics within this complex and universal phenomenon selected by the author. Nevertheless, in order to offer visitors a basic insight into the roots and the development of the phenomenon, the exhibition was divided into two parts and thus combined two approaches: the traditional one presenting the origin and development of the phenomenon through history to the present day, and the artistic approach with which a selected group of modern artists offered their free and subjective view of the stereotype phenomenon. However, in spite of this division into the scientific and artistic part, the whole exhibition evoked the spirit of a modern conceptual work of art based on the idea that stereotypes do not lose their actuality even in a time of universally accessible education.

The first part of the exhibition presented the origin of the concept derived from the printing industry and the earliest examples of stereotypes as expressions of the understanding of *oneself* and of *others*. The first thing that can be noted with regard to the design of the exhibition is the insistence of the author on self-sufficiency and obviousness of the selected examples which, taken out of context, display more similarities than differences between the different epochs in which they came into being. Moreover, in this way it was possible to avoid the chronological sequence of stereotypes through history; instead of that visitors were offered a freely structured survey of stereotype continuity throughout human history, and the exhibited objects and reproductions were permitted to speak for themselves. Examples of stereotypes were organised in several categories - ethnic, religious, racial and gender stereotypes – and illustrated with geographical and satiric maps, ethnographic objects like kitchen wall hangings, tourist souvenirs, children's toys, old newspapers and posters, packaging for various products, etc. (Fig. 3, 4/p. 347) The exhibition space included multimedia support, i.e., projections and a space in which the visitors could present their views about the stereotypes and record them on a camera.

The exhibition was a complex task focused on presenting a widespread, usually negative phenomenon which made it easier for various communities and individuals to understand "others" through generalisation and simplification in line with the principle *pars pro toto* – the part is taken for the whole. Since the phenomenon transcends by far the boundaries of ethnology and extends into areas dealt with by other scientific disciplines, the exhibition had an interdisciplinary character and endeavoured to consider stereotypes from different aspects. This is why numerous local and foreign artists - architects, sculptors, painters and photographers - offered their subjective interpretation of the concept which sometimes provides more questions than answers and thus questions its foundation in reality.

The exploration of stereotypes and similar negative perceptions of *others* is becoming increasingly topical in international and national science, as manifested by numerous publications, exhibitions, works of art and films. The exhibition *Blonde Joke: Stereotypes Which We Live By* exemplifies the elaboration of a complex notion which is the subject of interest of several scientific disciplines. Along with the intention to bring closer the complex origins and development of stereotypes in the culturological context, its idea was to try to provoke in visitors the question regarding the perception of *others* from the position of one's own identity.

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