

## *The Seljan Brothers* – *Croatian Explorers in South America.* Paraguay, Chile and Brazil 2022

When I assumed the management of the Non-European Collection of the Ethnographic Museum in 2015, the first query about the material donated by researchers Mirko and Stevo Seljan came from Paraguay. Gustavo Glavinich, an architect of Croatian descent, inquired about the book “El Salto del Guayra” published in Spanish and French by the Seljan brothers in 1905 in Buenos Aires. The book follows their journey from Asunción to the Guairá Falls, located on the border between Paraguay and Brazil, that no longer exist due to the construction of a hydroelectric plant. Glavinich heard about it in 2000s in Asunción, when Mario Saletto and Jasna Ferluga were there to film the series “In the Footsteps of the Seljan Brothers”. The volume provided him with valuable information about the time when the Seljan brothers visited the area, while his colleague from the Faculty of Architecture used several photos in a monograph on the architecture of the Guaraní people.

In addition to the photos published in the book “El Salto del Guayra”, the Ethnographic Museum keeps a whole series of photographs taken on that voyage. However, for many of the photographs it was yet to be established where they were taken, which would not have been possible without the help of Mr Glavinich. After more than a hundred years since the photographs were taken many of the places have different names, while not having the knowledge of the locations or history makes this process all the more difficult from our office in Zagreb. Aware that I would require assistance of local people in determining the locations in the photographs taken throughout South America by the Seljan brothers, and in a desire for the collected material “get out” of the museum depot, I embarked on the digitization of the photographs and of the rest of the vast material donated by the Seljan brothers: museum objects, geographical maps, newspaper articles, books, letters, lecture posters and postcards.

In the 1970s, ethnologist and curator at the Ethnographic Museum Aleksandra Lazarević and geographer Zvonimir Keler published extensive studies about the explorations of the Seljan brothers, however the majority of the photographs, along with other material, was never published due to the limitations of the press at the time. Therefore, the next step was to make the material in digital format publicly available, which was published in 2017 on the website [bracaseljan.emz.hr](http://bracaseljan.emz.hr), in Croatian and English language. On that occasion, the National and University Library in Zagreb digitized two books by the Seljan brothers that the Museum does not have in its holdings, while the book “El Walto del Guyra” was translated into Croatian. In addition to the digitized materials, the website provides interactive maps tracing the journeys of the Seljan brot-



Picture 1. Exhibition display in the Museum Casa dos Contos, Ouro Preto, Brazil, Private archive

hers around Ethiopia and South America, in order to summarise and make their truly extensive work more accessible to the public.

The following year we prepared the exhibition “Seljan Brothers in Desert and Wilderness” with which we wanted to envision the regions where the Seljan brothers passed during their explorations. Designers Iva Hrvatin, Katarina Peović and Marita Bonačić designed interactive content so that visitors could feel a fraction of the strain endured by the Seljan brothers during the expeditions: walked on a conveyor belt, the visitors came across names of the cities that Mirko passed through during his hike from St. Petersburg to Paris, while rowing on an ergometer started an audio recording – of fragments from the diary which the Seljan brothers wrote while sailing down the Paranapanema River. We also saw this exhibition as an opportunity to bring the topics of colonialism and eurocentrism closer to the domestic audience, and to place the activities of the Seljan brothers in the context of the epoch in which they lived. The 1931 film “Matto Grosso”, lent by the Penn Museum in Philadelphia, aided us in that endeavour.



Picture 2. Stevo Seljan's relatives who arrived from Rio de Janeiro: Stevo's grandson Janko Jr. and wife, Stevo's great-grandson Daniel Braga, Francisco Seljan with family and Marija Živković, Private archive

While preparing the exhibition, we immediately thought about the possibility of taking it to South America, but it was evident that the content of the exhibition would have to be adapted to an audience different from the Croatian one. Namely, during the guided tour of the exhibition in Zagreb, on several occasions people said that they did not want to spoil their idea about the Seljan brothers. It seems that even the information that the Seljan brothers used the expeditions to try to secure their own existence, which the media have been presenting for decades, destroyed their romantic idea of the two adventurers. On the other hand, the audience in South America has no knowledge or idea about the Seljan brothers, but is to a greater or lesser degree aware of the violent past related to colonialism. Although the Seljan brothers were hired by the authorities of countries that had already gained their independence, they too were aware of the violent past marked by colonialism. So, in addition to immense joy, the possibility of presenting the exhibition in South America, provoked in me a very strong feeling of discomfort. How to present this topic in such different contexts (from Paraguay and Chile to Brazil), with whose relationship to the past and colonialism I was acquainted only indirectly?

In any event, it was necessary to deepen the knowledge of local circumstances in the period when the Seljan brothers spent time there. For example, one of their planned expeditions in the Brazilian state of Mato Grosso was not realised because an armed conflict broke out. Although the cause and course of the conflict are not relevant for the exhibition itself, it was important for me to find out the circumstances in order to better understand the situation in which the Seljan brothers found themselves. Although a couple of years prior my attempts to get in contact with the museums in the capital of Cuiaba were unsuccessful, I now received an enthusiastic response from a political scientist from the University of São Paulo and the author of a book about the conflicts in Mato Grosso. During her research, she did not encounter a single photograph from the time, while the Ethnographic Museum keeps a series of photos taken by the Seljan brothers during the conflict. The diaries of the Seljan brothers have offered her a new perspective on the conflict, and she intends to present this material to the scientific community. I also received positive feedback in other contacts with individuals from Brazil and Peru who helped me identify the photographs. These experiences encouraged me to use the opportunity of setting up the exhibition in South America to initiate dialogue and open up new views and interpretations.

In 2019 we already started considering the possibilities of organising the exhibition in cooperation with the Embassy of the Republic of Croatia in Chile, Mr Gustavo Glavinich and Mr Milan Puh from the University of São Paulo, however, the pandemic made us redirect our attention. In 2022, when the Ambassador of the Republic of Croatia to Brazil, Mr Ranko Vilović, suggested that the exhibition could mark the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the international recognition of the Republic of Croatia, we readily accepted the offer and gathered everyone interested in the project. Next to the initiative of the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Republic of Croatia, the project was supported by the Central State Office for Croats Abroad, the Ministry of Culture and Media of the Republic of Croatia and the City of Zagreb.

Designers Iva Hrvatin and Marita Bonačić created a solution for the exhibition set up that should be economical and adaptable to different spatial requirements, since it was planned to organize the exhibition in six locations: in Asunción (Paraguay), Santiago (Chile), Lima (Peru) and three Brazilian cities. Texts, photos and QR codes used to access multimedia content, present the work of the Seljan brothers chronologically in 14 chapters printed on eight-metre-long canvases. Each canvas is folded down the middle and suspended from the ceiling, thus creating dynamism in the space and offering different placement options depending on the specifics of the exhibition venues.

It is an extenuating circumstance that the exhibition does not require the objects that the Seljan brothers brought from South America to be displayed or transported. Primarily because the most interesting segment of the material, that faithfully depicts their travels, are numerous photographs, articles and geographical maps, while the objects they brought from South America are unknown and interesting to a Croatian audience, but well known in South America. The exhibition is prepared in two versions: in Spanish and Portuguese. In order to avoid high transportation costs from Zagreb, the Spanish version was printed in Asunción and the Portuguese in São Paulo.

The first exhibition titled “The Seljan Brothers – Croatian Explorers in South America” was opened in Asunción on 30<sup>th</sup> March 2022 in the exhibition space Casa Castelvi, in the old part of the city that has been transformed into the Manzana de la Rivera cultural centre. The exhibition

was set up by Gustavo Glavinich, on the occasion of the 6<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the Croatian Diaspora of South America, which took place in Asunción from 29<sup>th</sup> to 31<sup>st</sup> March organized by the Paraguayan-Croatian Chamber of Commerce. Mr. Glavinich succeeded in his long-standing intention of publishing a reprint of Mirko and Stevo Seljan's book "El Salto del Guayra" which was presented at the opening. The exhibition was inaugurated by Zvonko Milas, the State Secretary of the Central State Office for Croats Abroad.

The exhibition then visited Santiago, in the exhibition space of the Faculty of Architecture and Urbanism, 8<sup>th</sup> – 24<sup>th</sup> June 2022. It was set up in cooperation with the University of Chile, headed by the university rector, Mr Enni Vivaldi Véjar, and the dean of the Faculty of Architecture and Urbanism, Manuel Amaya Díaz, as well as the Embassy of the Republic of Croatia in Chile and the Ambassador, Mrs Mira Martinec. The opening was attended by members of the diplomatic corps, state officials and members of the Croatian community, including Simon Borić, the brother of the Chilean president of Croatian descent.

The organisation of the exhibition in Brazil marked the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the international recognition of the Republic of Croatia and the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Brazil's independence. Thanks to the efforts of the ambassador of the Republic of Croatia in Brazil, Mr Ranko Vilović, the exhibition was included in the official anniversary programme.

The first opening was on 14<sup>th</sup> June in Ouro Preto, the town where Stevo Seljan lived for almost two decades. After Mirko's death, Stevo settled in that beautiful baroque town where he married María Aracy Lessa with whom he had four children. He was buried in 1936 at the cemetery of the church Igreja de Nossa Senhora do Carmo. Since his remains (probably) rest in a common grave, the Embassy of the Republic of Croatia in Brazil and the City of Ouro Preto placed a memorial plaque for Stevo Seljan at the entrance to the cemetery. The unveiling of the plaque was followed by a lecture about the Seljan family in the Museu da Inconfidência held by exhibition collaborator Dr Milan Puh. The exhibition was inaugurated in the afternoon hours at the Casa dos Contos Museum in the city centre, under the patronage of Mayor Ângelo Oswaldo de Araújo Santos.

Attending all the events of the day were Stevo Seljan's relatives who arrived from Rio de Janeiro: Stevo's grandson Janko Jr. and wife, Stevo's great-grandson Daniel Braga, and Francisco Seljan with family. At the inauguration, the mayor mentioned Stevo's wife, who during her lifetime published a book about the history of her native city. We had the impression that Ouro Preto truly supported us that day, since the event concerned a family who is part of their community. Also present at the opening was Dr Priscila de Azevedo Souza Mesquita, who has been researching the work of Stevo's eldest daughter, Zora Seljan, for many years. Zora was a writer and theatre scholar, publishing eighteen theatre plays and a dozen books of different literary genres, numerous newspaper articles, theatre reviews and interviews, therefore, we presented a short overview of her work at the exhibition. We also found out that local scientist Mr Victor Godoy is completing a documentary film about Stevo Seljan, and preparing a book about three foreigners who left their mark on Ouro Preto, including Stevo. It was a truly special day for all of us involved in the research of the Seljan family, whereas the exchange of information was extremely valuable for future research.

After Ouro Preto, the exhibition was inaugurated in São Paulo, at the cultural centre of the Regional Council for Engineering and Agronomy of the Federal State of São Paulo on 29<sup>th</sup> June 2022.

The exhibition was visited by representatives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Brazil and the city administration, as well as members of two Croatian community clubs. São Paulo is home to the largest Croatian community in Brazil, and thanks to their interest, in August, the exhibition was set up at the “Croatia Sacra Paulistana” house, where it could be visited by the participants of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Conference of the Croatian Diaspora in Brazil coming from all corners of the country.

The director of the Ethnographic Museum Goranka Horjan established contact with the Croatian communities in Bolivia and Argentina which demonstrated a great interest in hosting the exhibition, therefore, we believe that the exhibition will travel in the footsteps of the Seljan brothers for some time, and we hope that we will be able to realize the exhibition in Lima and Rio de Janeiro as planned. All this would not have been possible without numerous collaborators and their enthusiasm for the life and work of the Seljan brothers. However, the greatest merit certainly goes to Mirko and Stevo who, after over a century, once again managed to bring Croatian emigrants together and raise the interest of the local community in their ideas and endeavours.