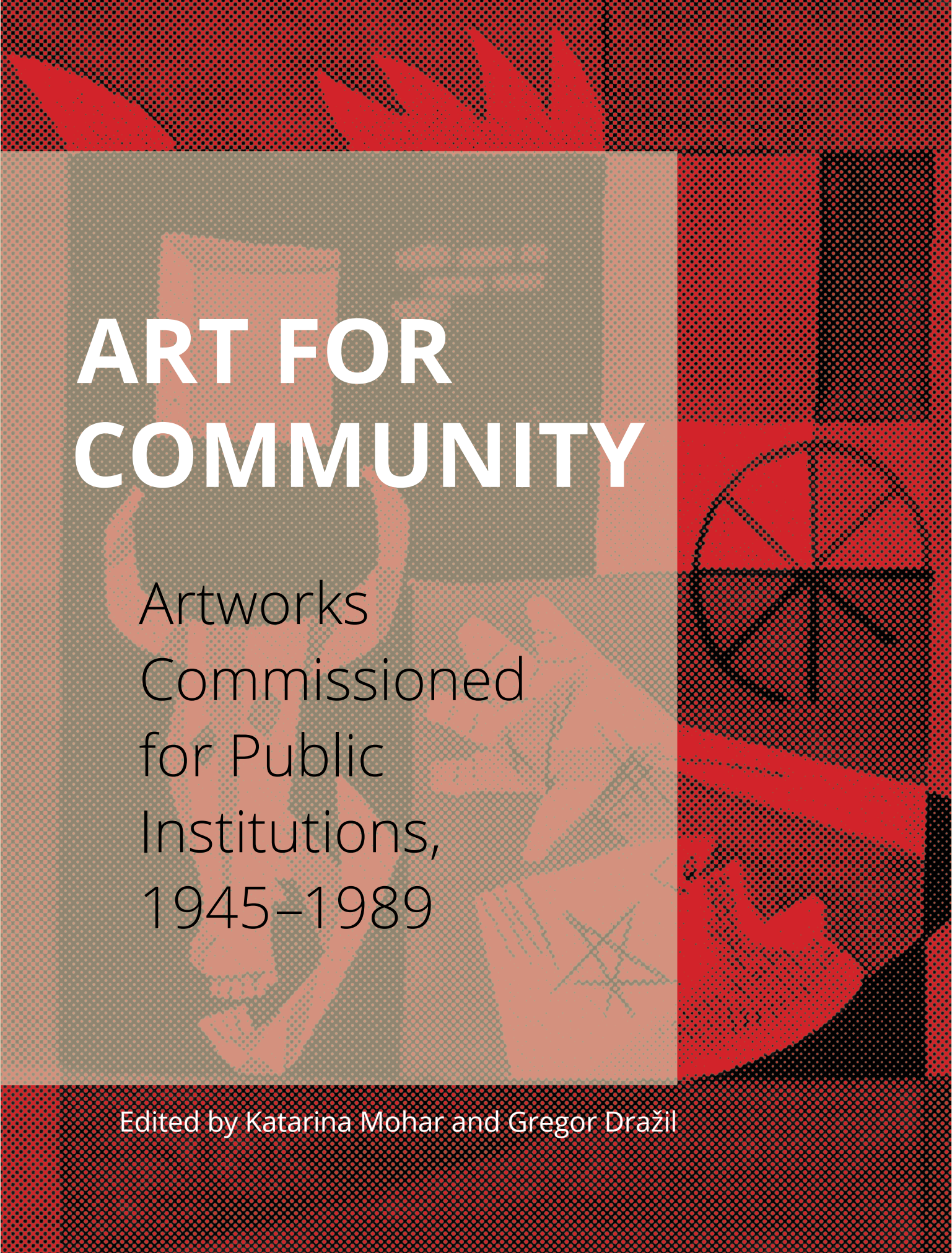




# ART FOR COMMUNITY

Artworks  
Commissioned  
for Public  
Institutions,  
1945–1989

Edited by Katarina Mohar and Gregor Dražil



Založba ZRC



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Ljubljana, 2026

Opera Instituti Artis Historiae

**Art for Community**

**Artworks Commissioned for Public Institutions, 1945–1989**

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Cover image: Ivo Šubic, unrealised sketch for the mosaic in the building of the People's Assembly of the People's Republic of Slovenia.  
Photo: Andreja Rakovec, ZRC SAZU.

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# TAPESTRIES AS PUBLIC ART IN ELITE SPACES OF SOCIALIST YUGOSLAVIA: THE CASE OF MARIJ PREGELJ'S TAPESTRIES FOR THE KOTEKS TOBUS BOUTIQUE

Nadja Zgonik

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Immediately after the Second World War, the idea emerged in socialist Yugoslavia that art should play an active role in shaping the new society. Art in public space was seen as a tool for ideological education, political affirmation, and the visualization of collective values, intended to support postwar reconstruction and socialist development. Between 1945 and 1950, under Soviet influence, Socialist Realism prevailed, demanding art that served ideological goals. Following the Tito–Stalin split in 1948, however, Yugoslavia began to seek its own path to socialism, which was gradually reflected in the arts through openness to modernist movements. In the 1960s, Western-style modernism became fully established not only in galleries but also in the public sphere, and works of modernist art became an integral part of the architectural environments of official buildings, educational institutions, hospitals, hotels, shops, and other public areas.

Among the various monumental wall painting techniques flourishing at the time – fresco, sgraffito, and mosaic – tapestry also began to establish itself as the most prestigious in the early 1960s. Its appeal stemmed not only from its visual impact, but also from the symbolic connotations of uniting art and labour, collective creation, and the linking of tradition with modernity. Tapestry proved particularly well suited to the socialist context because its materiality, softness, warmth, and handcrafted nature made possible the refinement and visual elevation of public spaces and their users – workers, citizens, and visitors – to a symbolic level of cultural equivalence with the classes that had previously been able to possess art only in private interiors.

This chapter examines the role of tapestry as a vehicle for artistic and ideological messages in the public space of Yugoslav socialism, with a particular focus on its affirmation in the 1960s. The selected case study consists of tapestries by the Slovenian painter Marij Pregelj (1913–1967), one of the main representatives of Yugoslav postwar figurative painting with a strong expressive tone, created for the Koteks Tobus fashion showroom in Ljubljana in 1966–1967. The art furnishings are analysed in

terms of their artistic, spatial, and social functions, and within the context of the architectural environment designed by the architect Oton Jugovec.

### The modernist revival of tapestry

Over the centuries, tapestry has maintained its status as an exclusive art form. During the Middle Ages and up to the Renaissance, it was considered one of the most prestigious forms of visual art, often valued more highly than paintings on canvas.<sup>1</sup> It served several functions simultaneously: it narrated stories from history, mythology, and religion while also demonstrating exceptional craftsmanship. It brought warmth, colour, and richness of texture to the interiors of castles, palaces, and townhouses, contributing significantly to a pleasant atmosphere. In addition to its aesthetic and symbolic value, it offered a practical advantage – its portability allowed it to be easily moved between residences, distinguishing it from frescoes and paintings, which were difficult to transport.<sup>2</sup>

With the Renaissance and the growing emphasis on the artist's individual creativity, tapestry gradually lost its prestige. It shifted from the sphere of high art to the margins, understood mainly as decorative or applied art. The academies, which in the modern age established themselves as custodians of artistic knowledge, did not recognize tapestry as a fully-fledged artistic medium, further contributing to its marginalization.<sup>3</sup>

After the Second World War, textile art once again attracted the attention of artists and theorists. The avant-garde movements of the early twentieth century had already incorporated textile materials into artistic expression, primarily in the context of interior design and applied art.<sup>4</sup> After 1950, however, a breakthrough occurred: textiles returned to the wall as independent images, no longer playing a subordinate role in relation to the space, but actively shaping it. Tapestry thus once again became a visual medium with a legitimate place within modern art.

Although the technique remained closely linked to manual labour, this no longer excluded it from the discourse of high art. On the contrary, the connection between the artist's concept and masterful execution became the foundation of tapestry's new status. This was also supported by the boom in the art market in the postwar period, in which works of art became important indicators of social standing and cultural capital.<sup>5</sup> Artists that created tapestries gained a status comparable to that of painters, and tapestries achieved high market values as remuneration for the artistic concept (the cartoon) and the demanding, time-intensive execution in workshops.

Another significant advantage of tapestry in the postwar period was its mobility, making it ideal for inclusion in international exhibitions. The architect and artist Le Corbusier therefore dubbed it the “nomadic mural”.<sup>6</sup> This quality was recognized by Zoran Kržišnik, a central figure in the postwar art system in Yugoslavia, who chose tapestry – alongside printmaking – as a key medium for the commercial promotion of Yugoslav art abroad. As the director of the Museum of Modern Art in Ljubljana, the secretary of the world-renowned Ljubljana International Biennial of Graphic Arts, and a member of numerous international juries, he used a carefully considered curatorial and cultural strategy to consolidate the international recognition of Yugoslav art. Due to limited financial resources, the initial focus on printmaking was pragmatic – it allowed for mass production and easy transport. In 1963, however, tapestry was added to the programme, which, in addition to mobility, offered the possibility of prestigious presentation in large format and a higher price bracket. It allowed the affirmation of monumental painting, and at the same time, as an artistic medium, it met both the artistic and commercial criteria of the period.

### **A traditional technique for a new tradition**

The renaissance of tapestry in the 1950s was driven by developments in France, a country with a centuries-old tradition of tapestry weaving. In 1946, the exhibition French Tapestry from the Middle Ages to the Present Day was held at the Paris Museum of Modern Art before touring Europe.<sup>7</sup> In 1953, it also travelled to Yugoslavia, visiting Belgrade and Zagreb.<sup>8</sup> The exhibition featured modern tapestries produced in the Aubusson workshop between 1936 and 1945 under the direction of Jean Lurçat.<sup>9</sup> It made a strong impression on the painter and printmaker Boško Petrović and provided significant stimulus for the development of tapestry in Yugoslavia, coinciding with renewed global interest in the art form.<sup>10</sup>

Initially, a few artists began to explore the new medium individually. In 1959, at the 3rd Rijeka Salon, an exhibition that made a significant contribution to the establishment of Yugoslav modernism in the 1950s, tapestry works were presented by three artists from Serbia: Boško Petrović, Lazar Vujaklija, and Jelena Ćirković.<sup>11</sup> Petrović sought to ensure that Yugoslav tapestry would keep pace with global trends. He produced his first tapestries with the help of village weavers working on traditional horizontal looms.<sup>12</sup> He soon met Etelka Tobolka, who was already developing tapestry as a complex artistic practice, akin to the French Gobelin tapestry technique.<sup>13</sup>



*Figure 1. Weavers at the tapestry looms, supervised by the head of Atelier 61, Etelka Tobolka, 1971. Photo: © 2026 BRANKA ON TEXTILES, Source: [brankaontextiles.com](http://brankaontextiles.com).*

On 28 February 1961, Boško Petrović and Etelka Tobolka established Atelier 61, the first professional art studio for tapestry weaving in Yugoslavia<sup>14</sup> – in a studio at the Petrovaradin Fortress above Novi Sad, which the municipal authorities had allocated to artists after the war. With support from the local community, they installed vertical looms designed specifically for artistic tapestry. Soon, three more looms were added, and the studio began its work. The technique used by the weavers was based on flat tapestry weaving, similar to the traditional Balkan kilim rug technique [Figure 1].

Pirot, a town in southeastern Serbia, was one of the centres of kilim weaving, establishing a link to folk art with a strong regional tradition.<sup>15</sup> A distinctive feature of this technique was its reversibility – the front and back of the tapestry are identical. It is also worth noting that, from the Middle Ages onwards, European tapestry workshops were predominantly staffed by male weavers, where-

as at Atelier 61 this role was taken on exclusively by female workers, who often acquired their skills within the family environment. Atelier 61 thus organically combined folk tradition with modernist artistic expression.

The question of a shared cultural identity in Yugoslavia, which would unite the people of the republics and provinces with different cultural backgrounds, was never presented as a political programme. However, it became a key issue when Yugoslav art was presented internationally. When selecting artists for exhibitions abroad, the logic of the “republican quota” – meaning equal representation of artists from all Yugoslav republics – often prevailed, sometimes at the expense of artistic quality. Critics in the West, however, frequently assessed the exhibitions as representative presentations of “Yugoslav art” and questioned its identity. Due to its connection to the folk heritage of weaving – which, in various forms, was common to all Yugoslav republics – tapestry, in its modern interpretation, united the whole of Yugoslavia and became one of the most representative artistic media, a reputation most notably carried to the world by Jagoda Buić.

In June 1962, just one year after its establishment, Atelier 61 presented its first nineteen woven tapestries at the Yugoslav People's Army Building (*Dom JNA*) in Belgrade, and subsequently at the *Matica Srpska* Gallery in Novi Sad. By August, the exhibition had travelled to Slovenia, where it marked the opening of the new Piran City Gallery.<sup>16</sup> The exhibition was accompanied by a catalogue featuring a text by Zoran Kržišnik,<sup>17</sup> demonstrating his early interest in and support for tapestry, as well as the idea of expanding the project in Slovenia.<sup>18</sup> Following the exhibition, it was most likely Kržišnik that encouraged three well-established Slovenian artists – Janez Bernik, France Slana, and Marij Pregelj – to produce cartoons, which were then transformed into tapestries by the weavers of Atelier 61. By February 1963, their new works had already been included in the exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in Ljubljana, which subsequently travelled to the Museum of Arts and Crafts in Zagreb.

In 1963, the exhibition of prints and tapestries by Atelier 61 began its tour of South America, visiting Brazil, Venezuela, and Mexico by 1965. In 1964, it was hosted in Oslo, and it later toured eastern Europe and the United States. The most ambitious project for promoting tapestry, however, was the exhibition French–Yugoslav Tapestries at the Adria Art Gallery in New York,<sup>19</sup> where Kržišnik displayed works by Yugoslav artists alongside French tapestries and works by Picasso, Klee, Miró, and other renowned names. The exhibition catalogue highlighted Janez Bernik, to whom the gallery dedicated a solo exhibition a month later, where he presented his paintings, prints, and tapestries.

The Adria Art Gallery<sup>20</sup> was a Yugoslav New York sales gallery that combined the strategic interests of the Museum of Modern Art in Ljubljana and the export company Intertrade from Ljubljana. Kržišnik, who was largely responsible for its establishment, regarded it as a key tool for entering the Western art market and for promoting Yugoslav art, particularly prints and tapestries as commercially viable genres. In an interview at the opening of the exhibition in 1967, he emphasized that he saw tapestry as “a fresh revival of traditional art as a new expressive medium”. In 1967, the gallery sold tapestries for \$33,500 (equivalent to approximately €287,000 today), which was more than the revenue for paintings (\$22,000) and prints (\$14,500). In the first half of 1968, sales increased by almost 50%.<sup>21</sup>

These figures confirm the soundness of Kržišnik's strategy: tapestry became a successful cultural export and a representative of Yugoslavia in one of the world's most important art markets, the United States.

## Marij Pregelj and tapestry

The painter Marij Pregelj was also represented at the tapestry exhibition held at the Museum of Modern Art in Ljubljana in 1963 – an exhibition that subsequently travelled to South America – with his first tapestry, titled *Kompozicija* (Composition) [Figure 2].<sup>22</sup> He was one of the most important figurative painters in Yugoslavia in the 1960s, recognized for his distinctly expressive style, in which existentialist themes, new figurative art, and the first influences of Pop Art intertwine. He was a versatile artist, mastering monumental painting, understanding it spatially in relation to architecture, and responding to commissions for frescoes, mosaics, sgraffito, and tapestries; he was also an illustrator and printmaker.

The theme of his first tapestry is linked to the mosaic work he was creating at the time. This was the monumental mosaic composition *Bitka na Sutjeski* (The Battle of the Sutjeska), commissioned for the new Federal Executive Council of Yugoslavia Building in Belgrade (now known as the Palace of Serbia), which he was completing in November 1962. In this work, a scene of a heroic, rebellious crowd plays a leading role. On the mosaic, measuring 500 x 1,400 cm, he created a compact block through the uniform arrangement of schematically depicted human figures, some of whom are screaming. He interrupted this rhythmic crowd divided into two bands by repeating vertical lines with the horizontal line of a bed occupied by lovers, who are also crying out for help with their mouths open. He first used the bed as a horizontal element in a mosaic at the Workers' Home in Trbovlje in 1957. With *Bitka na Sutjeski*, his work in mosaics came to an end, and within the context of mural painting he subsequently focused solely on tapestries.

Pregelj's first tapestry, *Kompozicija*, set off on the aforementioned world tour from the Museum of Modern Art in Ljubljana, along with other tapestries by Atelier 61. It was last listed in the catalogue of the New York exhibition French–Yugoslav Tapestries at the Adria Art Gallery in 1967, after which all trace of it was lost.<sup>23</sup> It may have been sold, or it may simply not have been returned and remained lost in a warehouse in the United States.

In 1965, Pregelj created another tapestry, this time of monumental dimensions, commissioned for the interior design of the House of Socio-Political Organisations in Maribor (now the Institute of Information Sciences, IZUM).<sup>24</sup> Pregelj produced the full-wall tapestry *Belo mesto* (The White City) on a monumental scale, measuring 405 × 770 cm, in 1964; it was woven in 1965 [Figure 3].<sup>25</sup> On this occasion, Pregelj was less expressive and more schematic in his depiction of figures, exercising greater control over the overall composition to maintain decorative harmony in the symmetry of the city depicted. The colour palette is subdued and



Figure 2. Marij Pregelj, *Kompozicija (Composition)*, woven tapestry, 1962, 246 × 195 cm. Produced by Atelier 61, Novi Sad, woven by Ana Horvat, Ružica Bačlija and Vida Ostojić. Location unknown. Source: Museum of Modern Art Photo Archive, Ljubljana.

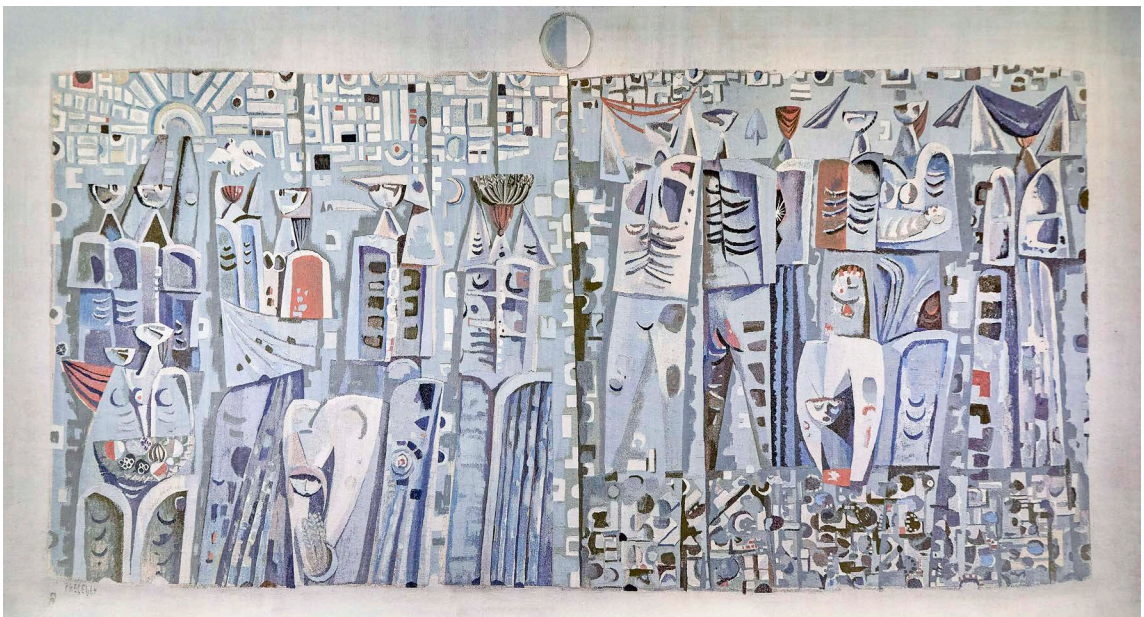


Figure 3. Marij Pregelj, *Belo mesto (White City)*, woven tapestry, 1965, 405 × 770 cm. Produced by Atelier 61, Novi Sad, woven by Smilja Lazić, Zora Lazić, Ana Horvat, Ružica Isakov, Milenka Isakov and Vida Ostojić. IZUM - Institute of Information Sciences, Maribor. Photo: © 2026 Rudi Uran.

harmonized in bluish and grey tones, with only a few red accents. His vision was to create a harmonious image of the city in its ideal form, drawing on his favourite iconographic theme of an ancient sun-drenched Mediterranean city. As an admirer of classical culture, Pregelj saw the city – which had grown from ancient foundations – as a well-organised community in which everything is in its place, a microcosm reflecting the cosmic order. With this radiant image of the city, believing that a painter can contribute to a better society, he optimistically evokes scenes of allegories of good governance in the city.<sup>26</sup>

### Commission for the Koteks Tobus Boutique in Ljubljana

The tapestries for the Koteks Tobus Boutique in Ljubljana were Marij Pregelj's final commission for a public space. Due to his untimely death in 1967, he most likely never saw them in their finished form. The Koteks Tobus Boutique, the first high-fashion shop in Ljubljana and one of the first in Yugoslavia, opened on 5 September 1967 on the ground floor of the Koteks Tobus company building (now KOTO d.o.o.) at Miklošičeva 5 in Ljubljana.<sup>27</sup> The term *boutique*, borrowed from French, reflected a connection with the Western urban model of consumption, which was becoming increasingly prevalent in Yugoslavia at the time. The Koteks Tobus Boutique was thus not merely a commercial project, but also a cultural indicator of the shift in the social paradigm from the collective to the individual, from the ascetic to the prestigious. The venue was part of a wave of boutique openings in Ljubljana – alongside it, the Jež and Kapetanović boutiques opened in the same year<sup>28</sup> – which already signalled a moderate liberalization of the market economy and the gradual establishment of private enterprise in socialist Yugoslavia [Figure 4].



The Koteks Tobus Boutique was conceived as a space for a narrow segment of the social elite, but it was not intended as an exclusive

*Figure 4. A visit by Jovanka Broz, wife of President Josip Broz Tito, shortly after the opening of the Koteks Tobus boutique in Ljubljana, 1967. Photo: Foto-Slovenija Agency. Source: KOTO Photo Archive, Ljubljana.*

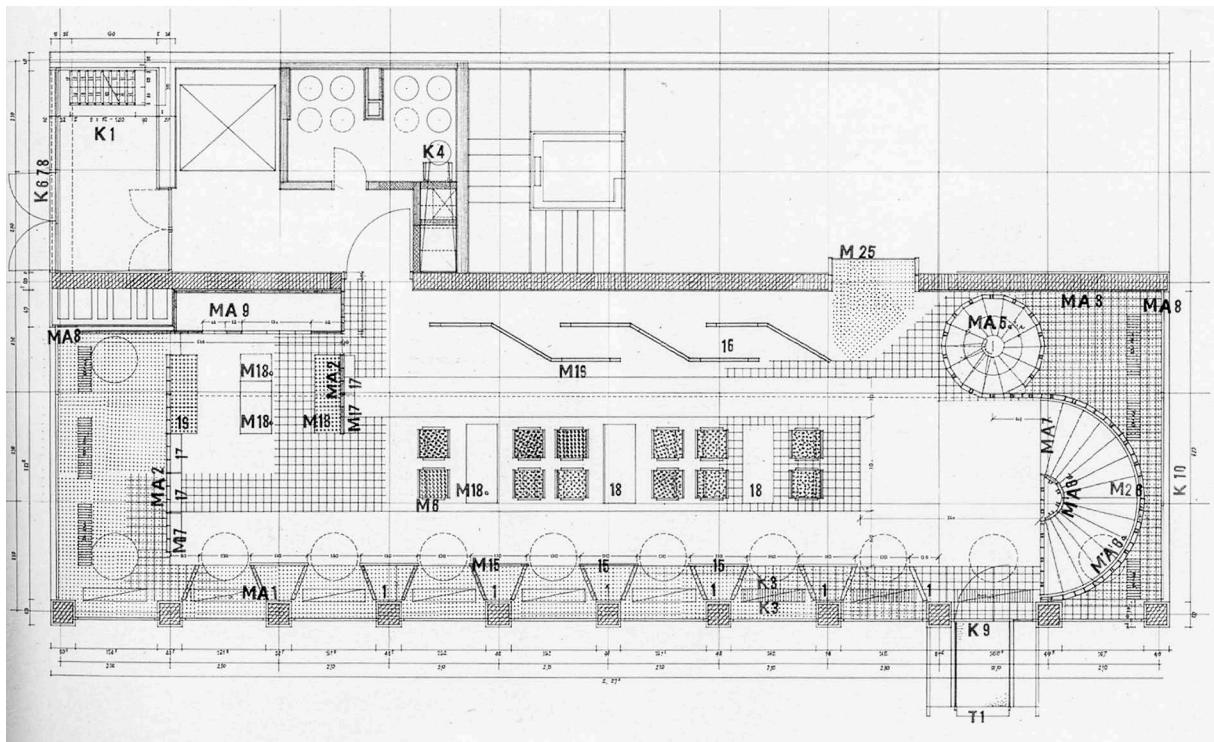


Figure 5. Oton Jugovec, floor plan of the Koteks Tobus boutique interior, 1966. Source: Zorec, "Oton Jugovec."

establishment; rather, it was meant to represent the opportunities offered to the individual by a Yugoslav-style socialist society, suggesting that the political system had led to a prosperity in which aestheticized luxury had become accessible even to the average citizen.

The architectural design of the ground floor interior of the 1964 office building, constructed following the plans of the architect Emil Medvešček, was taken over in 1966 by the architect Oton Jugovec, who had previously collaborated with Medvešček on the construction of the Main Cooperative Union in Ljubljana (1953–1956). This project, his first experience of a holistic synthesis of architecture and fine art, is also considered one of the first examples of its kind in postwar Slovenia.<sup>29</sup>

The boutique's interior design featured carefully selected materials and uniquely designed furniture: the circular staircase leading below ground was made from locally sourced Cordevolian limestone from Hotavlje, with a leather handrail. The curtains were richly draped, and unique light fittings, featuring strings of glass tubes, echoed the motif of the curtains. Jugovec's armchairs, designed specifically for the boutique, and clinker paving completed the ensemble.<sup>30</sup> The artistic furnishings were intended to give the space a special prestige. Jugovec invited Marij Pregelj, an established expert in mural painting, to collaborate.<sup>31</sup> The architect expected

*Figure 6. View of the interior of the Koteks Tobus boutique, 1967. Source: KOTO Photo Archive, Ljubljana.*



that Pregelj's contribution would not merely be decorative but would convey a message with a sharp focus on content [Figures 5–6].

Nothing is known of the guidelines for the commission that may have been provided by the management of Koteks Tobus, but it can be concluded that the architect and the painter had complete creative freedom because the idea of decorating a high-fashion clothing store with tapestries is rather extravagant. Furnishing an exclusive fashion space with tapestries was bold and aligned with contemporary practices, such as those introduced in Paris at the beginning of the twentieth century by Marie Cuttoli, an art patron and collector, and the founder of the Myrbor boutique.<sup>32</sup> In addition to clothing, she began exhibiting and selling tapestries by modern artists, woven by women in Algeria. Among the first contributors was Jean Lurçat, who later became a key figure in the revival of contemporary tapestry. Cuttoli conceived the boutique as a hybrid between an exhibition hall and a high-end shop – a practice that can be understood as a historical precedent for the Ljubljana example, although it is not known whether Jugovec was aware of it. As with Cuttoli, the Koteks Tobus project also regarded tapestry as an artistic medium that adds a layer of semantic and material exclusivity to a space.

Marij Pregelj created eight tapestry designs for the interior of the Koteks Tobus fashion boutique in Ljubljana in an exceptionally short period, as can be inferred from the surviving studies and sketchbooks held by the Museum of Modern Art in Ljubljana. In addition to those in sketchbooks,



*Figure 7. Marij Pregelj on the living floor of the studio at Svetčeva 1 in Ljubljana, 1960. Source: Museum of Modern Art Photo Archive, Ljubljana.*

the drawings were made on pages torn from the French fashion magazine *Elle*, which featured fashion images and advertisements printed on glossy paper. Such glossy paper was rare in Yugoslavia in the 1960s – imported magazines far surpassed domestic publications in print quality and, due to their price and exclusivity, were considered prestigious items. The painter's wife, Zlata Škafar Pregelj, a great lover of fashion, regularly purchased these magazines.

Pregelj's daily exposure to materials from fashion culture merged with his artistic work. He lived with his family in a live-in studio in Ljubljana's Rožna Dolina neighbourhood, where daily life was organically intertwined with his creative practice. Photos of the living area reveal textile interventions in the space – curtains not only covered the windows but also hung along the walls, dividing the interior into smaller units. This specific use of textiles as a spatial medium invites reflection on the mobility and softening of space, which also relates to tapestries as spatial elements and to the artist's relationship with textiles, fashion, and mass imagery [Figure 7].

In 1966, when he accepted a commission to create tapestries for a fashion boutique, Pregelj sought inspiration in contemporary fashion magazines. He primarily looked for photos of models in various poses and advertisements featuring distinctive textures and layers of colour. He overlaid these



*Figure 8. Marij Pregelj, Female head, 1966 (6 September), collage and gouache on magazine paper, 29 × 20.5 cm, Museum of Modern Art, Ljubljana. Photo: Dejan Habicht, Matija Pavlovec. Source: Museum of Modern Art Photo Archive, Ljubljana.*

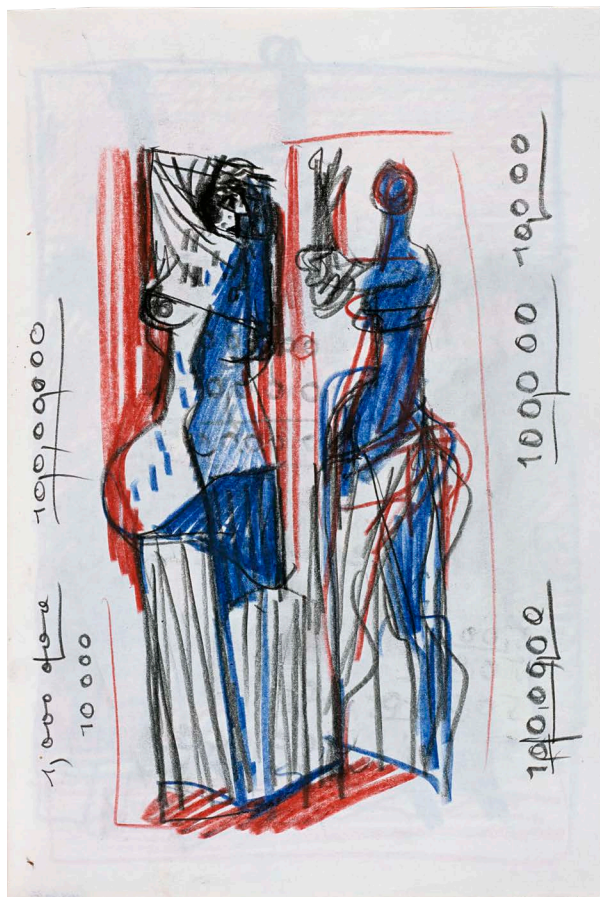
with interventions in gouache – using a brush and black paint, he transformed the realistic figures into stylized images in the spirit of Cubism. For example, he retained the frontal eye from the original photograph while covering the entire face with a brushstroke and transforming it into a profile. At times, he also incorporated collage into the process – cutting, tearing, and pasting photographs, and transforming them into a new surrealist whole [Figure 8].

Based on Pregelj's studies held by the Museum of Modern Art in Ljubljana, it is possible to determine the timeframe for the creation of individual figurative compositions. Between 6 and 20 September 1966, he sought compositional solutions for the arrangement of figures,<sup>33</sup> and in the first week of October he devoted himself to the details.<sup>34</sup> He then sent the cartoons to Atelier 61 in Novi Sad, where work began immediately: six tapestries were completed before the end of

1966, and the last two in early 1967.<sup>35</sup> Although it was customary for the cartoons to be returned to the artist once the weaving was complete, they were not preserved in the artist's studio. Nor are the names of the weavers recorded in the archives of Atelier 61, from which it can be concluded that they were woven by Etelka Tobolka herself, who often carried out the most demanding projects independently during this period.

Eight tapestries in portrait orientation (each measuring 255 x 118 cm) present a sequential series of figural scenes with centrally positioned female figures in various combinations, poses, and cut-outs. There are individual figures, pairs, figures in mirror images, and sequences, alluding to the arrangement of images in fashion photography – more specifically in editorial photography, in which body posture is precisely determined to present the product. Pregelj's figures also appear reserved and posed; their movements are frozen and precisely codified. At times the women resemble ancient torsos, at other times dress forms, and sometimes they are brought to life by gestures. Gender identification is further emphasized by attributes such as a comb, a necklace, a belt, or a tailor's tape measure; a camera is also found among them [Figure 9].

Figure 9. Marij Pregelj, *Study for a figural composition*, 1966 (29 September), pastel on paper, 29 × 20.5 cm, Museum of Modern Art, Ljubljana. Photo: Dejan Habicht. Source: Museum of Modern Art Photo Archive, Ljubljana.



The visual cohesion of the series is achieved through a uniformly coloured background, which links all the figural groups into a single frieze, reflecting the artist's conception that all eight works form a unified scene. The background is dominated by Pregelj's characteristic Pompeian red, a colour he often used to denote intense emotional states, although in this instance in a tonally subdued shade. The pinkish-red hue creates a sense of psychological tension for the viewer, establishing a complex atmosphere – both aesthetically and in terms of content. The viewer sees a depiction of a ritual that is not elevated above the everyday, but is entirely secular, and depicts a female practice of beautification and narcissistic display. Oto Bihalji-Merin had already noted that, in this work, Pregelj's characteristic tragic intonation transformed into something witty, elegant, and decorative, as “befitting the purpose”<sup>36</sup> [Figure 10].

The humorous tone that pervades individual scenes in the tapestries does not exclude a critical edge. Through his irony toward the fashion world and consumer culture, Pregelj reveals a unique ambivalence: as an



Figure 10. Tapestries for the *Koteks Tobus boutique*, 1–4, 1966–67, each 255 × 118 cm, Ptuj-Ormož Regional Museum. Source: Ptuj-Ormož Regional Museum Photo Archive.





Figure 10. Tapestries for the *Koteks Tobus boutique*, 5–8, 1966–67, each 255 × 118 cm, Ptuj-Ormož Regional Museum. Source: Ptuj-Ormož Regional Museum Photo Archive.



artist that was not overly concerned with outward appearance himself, he maintained a distance from women's self-evident pursuit of beauty and vanity, which were simultaneously objects of ridicule and admiration. This tension between irony and empathy is subtly embodied by the female figures in his tapestries, who oscillate between stereotypical flirtatiousness and frozen detachment.

Pregelj's symbolic register is based on contrasts, with the archetypal image of the woman appearing both as a seductress and as a mother – the *magna mater*, the bearer of fertility and power. A telling example of this dialectic is the depiction of the pregnant actress Marija Lojk, whom Pregelj painted in accordance with his own artistic vision during the late stages of her pregnancy in 1966, while completing the cartoons for his tapestries. This further confirms the range of female representations, which extend from sexualized images to symbols of maternal transcendence.

The visual representation also functions as a network of cultural references. Through allusions to the art of antiquity – frontal figures, women's hairstyles characteristic of the Roman Republican era, and colouristic echoes of Pompeian frescoes depicting scenes from the cult of Dionysus in the Villa of the Mysteries in Pompeii, also echoed in the principle of vertical tapestry panels, reminiscent of scenes "cut out" by black pilasters – Pregelj subtly bridges the past and the present. Even the famous torso of the Venus de Milo is transformed in his imagination into a cyclopean dress-maker's mannequin – with a single eye and painted toenails, standing on high heels, a characteristic prop of Greek theatre – thereby parodying the idealized classical image and embedding it in a consumerist context.

The synthesis of the figurative and the ornamental is achieved in these works through a pronounced emphasis on textile materiality. The vertical format of the tapestry intertwines with the horizontal logic of weaving, whereby the coloured bands not only shape the bodies of the female figures but also evoke the textile surface of the tapestry itself. This collage-like composition, which combines pictorial, textile, and symbolic layering, forms a distinctive visual language that transcends the boundaries between high and low art and the everyday aesthetics of mass imagery.

## Conclusion

Pregelj conceived the series of tapestries as an eight-part spatially dynamic frieze, composed of several sequences of related scenes, which, when arranged as a spatial screen, would function as a mobile wall. According to the architect's plans, the eight tapestries were to be mounted on three

*Figure 11. Model in the interior of the Koteks Tobus boutique in Ljubljana, with Pregelj's tapestries in the background, c. 1967. Photo: FotoStaut, Ljubljana. Source: KOTO Photo archive, Ljubljana.*



freestanding screens – two with three panels and one with two panels – which would conceal the cloakroom area on the ground floor [Figure 11]. The tapestries were created between late 1966 and early 1967. When they were delivered to Ljubljana in spring 1967, Pregelj – who died unexpectedly on 18 March 1967 due to post-operative complications – most likely never saw them, and he certainly did not live to see them installed.<sup>37</sup> Consequently, he was unable to oversee the final installation, which did not follow his original design: instead of being hung, six tapestries were nailed to wooden frames and mounted as a fixed wall against the rear wall of the upper floor, and the remaining two were placed in the basement. This significantly undermined the conceptual spatial dynamics of the original plan.<sup>38</sup> Even as part of the interior, the tapestries remained in place for only three years – before the end of 1970, they were removed from the shop to make room for additional shelving units, and, wrapped in polyvinyl, they were stored in the company's warehouse.<sup>39</sup>

Due to the persistent enquiries of the architect Maruša Zorec while preparing the 1998 exhibition on the architect Oton Jugovec at the *Can-karjev dom* Cultural and Congress Centre, five tapestries were found in the central warehouse of the KOTO company in Zalog, thanks to Alenka Pečenko. The remaining three were later found in the Triglav commercial building in Banja Luka.<sup>40</sup> The first five tapestries were restored between 2001 and 2002, and all eight were conserved, restored, and presented to the public in their entirety for the first time at an exhibition at the Ptuj Regional Museum in 2003.<sup>41</sup> In 2020, the Ptuj–Ormož Regional Museum,

with financial support from the Ministry of Culture, purchased the tapestries from the company KOTO, thereby bringing the entire collection into the public domain.

Pregelj's tapestries for the Koteks Tobus boutique occupy a special place in the artist's oeuvre. They represent one of the rare instances of a monumental work of art commissioned by a private client for a publicly accessible space that served neither a political nor a broader social function. The tapestries were designed for the interior of a fashion boutique, where art did not serve an ideological message but instead helped shape the aesthetics of the consumer experience. Nevertheless, Pregelj did not abandon his message; he introduced a gentle irony regarding consumerism and the blind pursuit of fashion into the series.

In this context, the tapestries for Koteks Tobus go beyond the scope of Pregelj's later work for public spaces. They represent a prime example of his understanding of art as visual storytelling in constant dialogue with everyday life. His work was characterized by a focus on humanistic themes and a desire to transcend modernist hermeticism. Pregelj believed that a work of art must convey universal themes and be clear enough to speak to the widest possible audience. Through his monumental wall painting – much like the Mexican muralists – he sought a synthesis between art and space and strove to bring it closer to the masses. By interweaving the figurative, the ornamental, and the architectural, he created monumental compositions not only in fresco and mosaic, but also in tapestry, which he understood as an equally valid medium for visual narratives of the contemporary world.

At the same time, the fate of these tapestries reveals the broader institutional context of postwar textile art in Yugoslavia. Paradoxically, at the time of Atelier 61's first international successes – achieved just a few years after its founding – headlines about the possibility of the workshop's closure had already appeared in newspapers. Although annual production in its most successful years reached up to 120 m<sup>2</sup> of tapestries, the studio soon encountered the limitations of the art market.<sup>42</sup> Excessive stock and the gradual decline of the public procurement system – which under socialism had served as a substitute for the private art market – became a serious problem in the 1970s because only the commercial art market could allow the workshop to operate independently. Nevertheless, Atelier 61 successfully weathered the politically and economically turbulent decades in two countries, Yugoslavia and later Serbia, and it continues to operate to this day. In the contemporary art context, textile art is re-establishing itself and becoming increasingly relevant – not only through its

materiality, which offers a respite from technological alienation, but also as a means of addressing current issues such as the role of women in art, collective creation, collaborative artistic practices, and market critique.

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## Endnotes

- 1 Thomas P. Campbell, *Tapestry in the Renaissance: Art and Magnificence* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2002), 4.
- 2 Campbell, *Tapestry in the Renaissance*, 23.
- 3 Glenn Adamson, *Thinking through Craft* (Oxford: Berg, 2007), 68–69.
- 4 Magdalena Droste, *Bauhaus 1919–1933* (Cologne: Taschen, 2019), 132–137.
- 5 K. L. H. Wells, *Weaving Modernism: Postwar Tapestry between Paris and New York* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019), 159.
- 6 Jean-Louis Cohen, “Walls of Wool,” in *Le Corbusier Nomadic Murals* (New York: Almine Rech Editions, 2023), 33.
- 7 See the exhibition catalogue *La Tapisserie française du Moyen Âge à nos jours* (Paris: Éditions des Musées Nationaux, 1946).
- 8 See the exhibition catalogue *Izložba francuskih tapiserija od srednjega vijeka do naših dana* (Zagreb: Muzej za umjetnost i obrt, 1953).
- 9 Jean Lurçat (1892–1966) was a central figure in the revival of tapestry in France in the twentieth century. Through his work in Aubusson, he significantly influenced contemporary visual art and redefined the medium of textile as a vehicle for autonomous artistic expression.
- 10 Goranka Vukadinović, “Atelje 61 – od zanatske radnje do centra tapiserije,” in *Tapiserije. Atelje 61*, ed. Goranka Vukadinović and Ivan Karlavaris (Novi Sad: Atelje 61, 2002), 19.
- 11 See the exhibition catalogue *3. Salon '59. Slikarstvo, kiparstvo, tapiserija* (Rijeka: Galerija likovnih umjetnosti, 1959).
- 12 Vukadinović, “Atelje 61,” 19.
- 13 Etelka Tobolka (1925–2006) was a key figure in Yugoslav textile art. Her expertise in traditional weaving and her experimentation with Gobelin techniques were crucial to the development of professional textile production at Atelier 61. She studied at the College of Applied Arts in Budapest, and she studied tapestry and weaving techniques in Vienna and Aubusson.
- 14 Atelier 61 was one of the few institutionalized artistic textile workshops in the socialist countries of that era, providing a direct link between artists and craftspeople (weavers). It is an institution that has survived all political changes and remains in operation today. See Laslo Silađi and Goranka Vukadinović, *50 godina “Ateljea 61”* (Petrovaradin: Atelje 61, 2011).
- 15 Pirot kilims were exhibited at numerous international fairs in the twentieth century as a representative product of Yugoslav folk art. For more information, see Milica Petković and Radmila Vlatković, *Pirotski ćilim = The Pirot Kilim* (Belgrade: Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, 1996).
- 16 The exhibition at the Piran City Gallery in 1962 was among the first institutional presentations of contemporary tapestry in Slovenia. After this exhibition, thanks to Kržišnik, collaboration between Slovenian artists and Atelier 61 quickly became a regular practice. See the exhibition catalogue *Tapiserije: Atelje 61* (Piran: Mestna galerija Piran, 1962).
- 17 Zoran Kržišnik (1920–2008) was the most important figure in the internationalization of Yugoslav art, a member of international juries, and a curator with outstanding international connections, respected as an authority and dedicated to establishing networks of cultural exchange between East and West. This is discussed in greater detail in Beti Žerovc, *Kurator in sodobna umetnost. Pogovori* (Ljubljana: Maska, 2008), in the chapter “Pogovor z Zoranom Kržišnikom,” 38–48. See also: Beti Žerovc, *When Attitudes Become the Norm: The Contemporary Curator and Institutional Art* (Ljubljana: Društvo Igor Zabel za kulturo in teorijo; Berlin: Archive Books, 2015).

- 18 See Zoran Kržišnik's introductory text in the exhibition catalogue *Tapiserije. Atelje 61* (Piran: Mestna galerija Piran, 1962).
- 19 See the exhibition catalogue *French–Yugoslav Tapestries* (New York: Adria Art Gallery, 1967).
- 20 It was in operation for just over a year. See Nadja Zgonik, "Jugoslovska socialistična umetnost na ameriškem trgu. Primer prodajne galerije Adria Art v New Yorku 1967–1968," *Časopis za kritiko znanosti* 49, no. 283 (2021): 30–43.
- 21 "Gallery zapira vrata," *Tedenska tribuna*, 9 October 1968, 5.
- 22 The tapestry measures 246 x 195 cm and was woven by Ana Horvat, Ružica Bačlija, and Vida Ostojić. The list of works in the Atelier 61 archive gives the date of completion as 21 December 1962. Atelier 61 Archive, list of works.
- 23 *French–Yugoslav Tapestries*, n. p.
- 24 Alongside Pregelj, the art commission selected Janez Bernik, Janez Vidic, and Janez Šibila.
- 25 It was woven by Smilja Lazić, Zora Lazić, Ana Horvat, Ružica Isakov, Milenka Isakov, and Vida Ostojić, and produced by Atelier 61 in 1965. Atelier 61 Archive, list of works.
- 26 It can be compared to the allegory of good and bad governance in Ambrogio Lorenzetti's work in the town hall in Siena.
- 27 I. V., "Nova modna trgovina," *Delo*, 5 September 1967, 3. Koteks Tobus was a successful import-export company that traded internationally in pig and cow hides, leather, shoes, and fur coats.
- 28 Marija Simčič, "Kaj je boutique?," *Tovariš*, 26 September 1967, 38.
- 29 Maruša Zorec, "Oton Jugovec arhitekt/architect: 1921–1987," *Piranesi* 8 (11/12), 2000/2001, 46–49. Works of art by Stojan Batič, Lojze Spacal, Ivan Seljak Čopič and France Mihelič were included.
- 30 Zorec, "Oton Jugovec," 82.
- 31 A newspaper article provides a telling detail about the approximate value of the investment, from which it can be deduced that a significant proportion was allocated to refurbishing the boutique's interior. The value of the commercial building was 400 million federation dinars and the cost of outfitting the boutique was 62 million federation dinars. I. V., "Nova modna trgovina."
- 32 Wells, *Weaving Modernism*, 162.
- 33 Nadja Zgonik, "Slikarji in arhitekti," in *Marij Pregelj: Tapiserije iz butika Koteks Tobus* (Ljubljana: Cankarjev dom, 2001).
- 34 Nadja Zgonik, "Žensko obredje lepoticenja in uživanja v razkazovanju," in *Marij Pregelj: Tapiserije iz butika Koteks Tobus* (Ptuj: Pokrajinski muzej Ptuj, 2003), 1–4.
- 35 All are marked in the characteristic manner of Atelier 61 tapestries, with the artist's monogram (*M* and a mirrored *P*) and the workshop's mark A61, usually on the lower edge toward the left side.
- 36 Bihalji-Merin, *Marij Pregelj*, 136.
- 37 The store opened on 5 September 1967. I. V., "Nova modna trgovina."
- 38 It is hardly possible to reconstruct the arrangement because only one of the surviving photos shows a fragment with three tapestries. Perhaps the distribution across the floors can be inferred from the markings recorded on the black-and-white photos from the photo archive of the Museum of Modern Art in Ljubljana. The only reliable information is that the tapestries were densely nailed to the wooden frames of the screen panels because they were found in this state, which caused the damage and rust stains.
- 39 Aleksander Bassin, "In memoriam ali vprašanje javnosti," *Tovariš*, 30 March 1971, 50–51.

- 40 Alenka Pečenko, "Bil je čisto navaden telefonski klic in globok ženski glas na drugi strani," *Kotopis*, no. 5 (November 2001): 10–11.
- 41 The conservation and restoration project was led by Eva Ilec, with contributions from Rozalija Bubnjevič and Hermina Golc. More on this in Eva Ilec, "Konserviranje in restavriranje tapiserij iz butika Koteks Tobus," in *Marij Pregelj: Tapiserije iz butika Koteks Tobus* (Ptuj: Pokrajinski muzej Ptuj, 2003), 9–12.
- 42 Vukadinović, "Atelje 61," 20.

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## Tapiserija kot javna umetnost za elitni prostor v socialistični Jugoslaviji: primer tapiserij Marija Preglja za butik Koteks Tobus

### Povzetek

V članku je obravnavana tapiserija kot specifična oblika javne umetnosti, namenjena oblikovanju reprezentančnih prostorov za družbeno elito v socialistični Jugoslaviji. Osredotoča se na cikel tapiserij, ki jih je Marij Pregelj leta 1966 zasnoval za butik Koteks Tobus v Ljubljani, jih analizira ter raziskuje, kako ta dela artikulirajo pojme prestiža, modernosti in družbenega statusa v socialističnem družbenem okviru.

Marij Pregelj (1913–1967) sodi med vodilne predstavnike jugoslovanskega povojnega figuralnega slikarstva. Ukvarjal se je s slikarstvom, grafiko, risbo in ilustracijo. Zaradi mojstrskega obvladovanja različnih tehnik monumentalnega slikarstva, kot so freska, sgraffito, mozaik in tapiserija, pa je bil pogosto vključen tudi v sistem javnih naročil, ki jih je bilo v tistem obdobju veliko. Tapiserija ga je pritegnila na začetku šestdesetih let, ko se je začela uveljavljati v jugoslovanskem prostoru. Odločilna za njeno obuditev je bila ustanovitev delavnice za umetniško tkanje Atelje 61 leta 1961 v Novem Sadu, ki sta jo po francoskem zgledu zasnovala slikar in grafik Boško Petrović in umetnostna tkalka Etelka Tobolka. Delavnica je postala osrednje produkcijsko mesto umetniške tapiserije v Jugoslaviji in deluje še danes. Atelje 61 je omogočil povezavo med sodobno umetniško zasnovo (kartonom) in vrhunsko izvedbo, s čimer je tapiserija ponovno pridobila status legitimnega medija visoke umetnosti. Hkrati je bila v jugoslovanskem kontekstu zaznamovana tudi z navezavo na tradicijo ljudskega tkanja, zlasti čilimarstva, kar je prispevalo k njeni identitetni in kulturni vrednosti.

Prva tapiserija, stkana po Pregljevem osnutku v delavnici Atelje 61, je bila *Kompozicija* (1962, danes izgubljena), namenjena galerijski distribuciji. Leta 1964 je sledilo večje javno naročilo za tapiserijo *Belo mesto* (405 cm × 770 cm) za Dom družbenih organizacij (danes IZUM) v Mariboru.

Leta 1966 je Preglja k sodelovanju pri opremljanju interierja butika, ki ga je odprlo podjetje Koteks Tobus v Ljubljani, povabil arhitekt Oton Jugovec. To je bil eden prvih prostorov visoke mode v Jugoslaviji, kar je bilo znamenje, da se socialistična družba pod zahodnimi vplivi od enakopravnosti že nagiba k razslojenosti, od množične mode k elitni. Pregelj se je

odločil, da bo zasnoval cikel osmih tapiserij (255 cm × 118 cm), ki jih je mogoče brati kot friz, sestavljen iz pokončnih pravokotnikov. Ženske figure so postavljene v središču na monokromnih rožnato-rdečih ozadjih v zaporednih sekvencah, posamično, v parih ali trojicah, vse nameščene v koreografiranem gibanju, ki spominja na modno brv ali modno fotografijo. Ker se je Pregelj pri ustvarjanju v veliki meri napajal iz antične kulture, je tudi tu navkljub modernistični stiliziranosti likov postavil drzno primerjavo. Ženske prikazuje pri lepotičenju, narcističnem ogledovanju v zrcalih in razkazovanju v nadzorovanem gibanju, kot bi šlo za kode skrivnostnega rituala. Žensko vdanost in čaščenje mode je soočil z obredjem posvetitve mlade ženske v Dionizijeve misterije, kot ga prikazuje poslikava v Vili misterijev v Pompejih. Uporaba rdeče barve za ozadja in način grajenja kompozicije, ko so v pompejanski vili prizori ločeni s črnimi pilastri, pri Preglju pa jih ločujejo cezure med tapiserijami, tudi vizualno poveže obe umetnini. Primerjava skrivnostnega kulta iz rimske antike z modernimi rituali pomeni subtilno ironizacijo zasužnjenosti s potrošniško miselnostjo in podrejenosti dominantni tržni ekonomiji. Tako delo ob estetizaciji ohranja sporočilnost, saj se s tem, ko v vizualni narativ vnaša distancirano, rahlo ironično refleksijo sodobnega potrošništva in modnih praks, posmehuje zahodnjaški kapitalistični doktrini. Tako umetnik do ambienta, ki ga sam opremlja, vzpostavi kritično distanco.

Pregljeve tapiserije za butik Koteks Tobus zavzemajo posebno mesto v njegovem opusu. So redke primer monumentalne umetnosti, ustvarjene po naročilu socialističnega podjetja za javno dostopen, a izrazito prestižni interier, v katerem umetnost ne deluje kot neposredni nosilec ideološkega diskurza, temveč kot soustvarjalka estetike potrošniške izkušnje. Opremljanje butika tako ni bilo zgolj komercialni projekt, temveč tudi kulturni indikator premika družbene paradigme od kolektivističnih k bolj individualiziranim in prestižnim oblikam reprezentacije, za kar je bila tapiserija idealen medij.

A substantial body of postwar art created for institutional environments remains hidden in plain sight: in schools, hospitals, municipal offices, factories, hotels, shops, and other spaces of everyday life. Some works remain intact, others survive in altered interiors or as partial material remains, and still others are known only through scattered archival records, photographs, and uncertain

memories. Many have been covered, relocated, destroyed or forgotten, even though they formed an important part of postwar public space and visual culture.

This volume contributes to the transnational study of art

commissioned for public institutions, a field that remains unevenly researched across national contexts. The chapters show how institutions used art to shape their environments and how later changes in use or ownership affected the works' meanings and prospects for preservation.

