
THE MAD SILKMAN. ZIKA & LIDA
ASCHER: TEXTILES AND FASHION

CULTURAL STUDIES

*A reflection on the exposition
and workshop in
Uměleckoprůmyslové museum
01.06.2019*

Judith Cabello Villa
Charles University
Summer Semester
Department of Art Education
Faculty of Education

1. Introduction

As part of my Cultural Studies subject in the department of Art Education in the Faculty of Education of the Charles University I was asked to participate in a workshop that took place the 1st of June in the Museum of Decorative Arts of Prague (or Uměleckoprůmyslové museum). This document will gather information about the museum where it took place, the art exposition that the workshop was based on and about the workshop itself.

2. The museum

The Uměleckoprůmyslové museum is located in the heart of Prague, in the Jan Palach Square, surrounded by very important buildings and sightseeing sites of the city such as the Rudolfinium, the Jewish cemetery or the faculty of Arts and Philosophy of the Charles University.



1 The museum in its early days

The decision of creating a Museum dedicated to the Decorative Arts was not an overnight decision. During the 40 previous years before the construction of the building itself by the architect Josef Schulz, the city of Prague held many exhibitions about the decorative arts in many buildings of the city, for example in the Chamber of Trade and Commerce,



2 The Museum nowadays

the Old City Town Hall and in the Rudolfinium, the house of the Czech philharmonic. When the Chamber of Trade and Commerce decided to create a separate building to hold all these exhibitions about the decorative arts, in 1855; decided to create different halls for glass, ceramics, gold and silver, base metals, furniture, small sculptures, books and textiles items. The construction was finished in 1901. From the day of the inauguration of the museum until our time it has held numerous temporal exhibitions as well as permanent exhibitions.

3. The exposition

The exposition guides the visitor through the life, exile and success of the marriage between Zika and Lída Ascher, as well as dip into the insides of the textile design in Czechoslovakia during the mid-to-late 20th century.

The main goal of the exposition is to bring awareness to the importance of this couple in the history of fashion worldwide and recognize local and national talent. The Ascher family is not very well known in the Czech pop culture because of the exile they suffered by political reasons and the fact that they developed most of their career outside de Czechoslovakian borders.

The exposition is organized in four main rooms and a projection room. In each of these rooms there are objects, fabrics and garments of the different eras the family went through, artistically speaking.

The first room serves the purpose of introducing the family and specially the couple to the visitors, putting the main focus on their background before the war, their silk store and fashion atelier in the center of Prague, their exile story and their success in the UK and in Paris, essentially.



3. First room of the exposition

The second room focuses on their career during the war, when they had to move to London when the Nazis invaded Czechoslovakia. During that time Zika had a visionary idea; ask famous painters and artists of the time to create art pieces and then reflect them into silk scarves using various techniques such as screen printing or painting directly into the fabric. Among these artist we can find household names like Picasso, Matisse or Henry Moore. In this room, one model of a dress made of parachute fabric is exposed; Linda used all the fabric she could get in her hands because there was a big shortage of fabric because of war efforts. This shows her ability and creativity to make the most of what she had at that time.



4. The second room of the exposition

The third room focuses on the garments made with cotton- in contraposition to the scarves in the previous room that were made from silk. The dresses displayed in this room were made by haute couture designers like Dior, Balenciaga, Balmain, Chanel, Pierre Cardin or Yves Saint Lauren using Ascher's fabric. It also displays fabrics with nature motives like flowers, insects, birds or various plants. This room is a clear representation of the influence and importance of the family's presence in the high fashion of the 20th century.



5. The third room of the exposition

The fourth and last display room showcases the designs the couple made in while they were staying in the United States, from the decade of the 1960's until the 1980's when they died. In this era of their career they created a new firm called 'Bourec' which is a Czech word that translates into silkworm. This was a nod to their early career, even though they didn't use silk as much in this period of time. They experimented with many different materials like wool, synthetic fabrics or even paper. The couple gave special names to each one of their fabrics, making word games in the Czech language. In this part of the exposition we can see a diverse variety of styles accordingly to the era they were created. One of the most outstanding designs is a blouse that Lady Di wore.



6. The fourth room of the exposition

4. The workshop

The workshop that I participated in was a didactic extension of the exposition itself. It gave the visitor and viewer of the exposition the opportunity of testing and experiencing the techniques that the Ascher family used to print the designs into silk and also gave the opportunity to have a very close look at the fabrics used.

The workshop took place during all the day on the 1rst of June of 2019 and it was located on the garden of the museum, a transit point where many of the visitors stepped by. In the porch of the garden there were four tables set up with the different techniques and activities to do. The main goal of the workshop is to represent the creative process of crafting fabrics with different patterns, in this case flowers.

In the first table the visitors were presented with a little challenge. There were four boxes with different fabrics and they had to guess which one was using only the touch. Then, they could take a closer look to the fabrics with a magnifying glass gadget attached to a phone. This table represented the study of the differents types of fabric before deciding which one to use to print.



In the second table the visitors could use watercolors and chalk dust to draw floral motives like the ones printed on the designs of the exposition. The method to create one of the flowers using the chalk dust was using various stencils with different shapes of petals that interlayered seemed to create the appearance of a very big and dense flower. This represented the study of the shape of the flower to create a pattern.



In the third table, the visitors could try the technique of screen printing that the Ascher's used to transfer prints in their garments. The method consisted into crating a screen with a stencil with the desired design on it and go through it with paint of the colour of their choice. Then, they had to let it dry for a few time and use another screen with the same method to add more details to the design. The visitors could print the design in a piece of fabric or into a tote bag.



The last table was dedicated to the silk scarves themselves. In a corner the visitors could try on many silk scarves on your head using the directions of various vintage magazine pages. In the rest of the table visitors could experience how to paint directly on silk. The technique used consisted in drawing with a synthetic stopper to delimitate the sections and to prevent the colors from mixing with one another.



5. My experience and opinion

For me, it was a pleasant surprise to find this kind of exposition and workshop in Prague. I think it is very important to bring attention to unknown talents of the city, especially when the circumstances were that tough. In my opinion, the exposition was very well organized and built, it was easy to follow even though the visitor wouldn't have any background information about the topic.

I think the workshop was a great way to bring high fashion to the masses and transform it into a relaxed atmosphere where the public could come a little bit closer to it without feeling intimidated by it, phenomenon that happens very often with fashion. It was also a great way to bring art and fashion closer to children, because the workshop was very busy with them

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- En.upm.cz. (2019). The Mad Silkman. Zika & Lida Ascher: Textiles and Fashion - The Museum of Decorative Arts. [online] Available at: <https://en.upm.cz/the-mad-silkman-zika-lida-ascher-textiles-and-fashion/> [Accessed 8 Jun. 2019].
- En.upm.cz. (2019). about us - The Museum of Decorative Arts. [online] Available at: <https://en.upm.cz/about-us/> [Accessed 7 Jun. 2019].
- Blahova, L. (2019). Notes on the exposition. Prague
- UPM (2019). Šílený Hedvábník UPM.pdf. [online] Available at: https://drive.google.com/file/d/15P97g_AwR2N1QzJPfZLzZNxbXg45HKm9/view?usp=drivesdk [Accessed 7 Jun. 2019].