Diversity is a major characteristic of the Croatian woman, very often over in her village. Color, costume, and design to mark regional and, at times, village identity. How she ties it, and what colors and decorations she uses usually tell whether she is a younger or older maiden, married woman, or widow. She may be seen wearing a different style for everyday wear, normal holiday wear, and for festive occasions.

1. HEADRESS

Headress is an important part of a woman’s folk dress. She uses it to mark the significant changes in her life and to indicate her place in the social structure of her village. How she wears her hair, what kind of hat she wears and how she ties the hat, whether or not she wears a headscarf and how she uses it to mark the significant changes in her life and to indicate her place in the social structure of her village. How she ties it, and what colors and decorations she uses usually tell whether she is a younger or older maiden, married woman, or widow. She may be seen wearing a different style for everyday wear, normal holiday wear, and for festive occasions.

2. HANDICRAFT--CEREMONIAL TOWELS

Towels are headscarves worn by older married women. The preslica, by married women, needlework and appliqué joined loom embroidery, and, while red as the predominant color, both design and color are of relatively recent origin. BIZOVAC folk dress celebrates the unmarried woman with its headdress of flowers and wheat. Abundant eyelet embroidery, a lavishly decorated velvet shoulder scarf, a plain velvet to which are added additional decoration, pleating as a fashion statement, and commercial jacquard weave or shoulder scarves macramé tying of the tasseled fringe. Both shoulder scarves and collars are important to the achievement of the layered look so sought after by Slavonian women.

3. APRONS

Aprons are an integral part of woman’s folk dress in al-most all regions of Croatia, with a diversity of structure, color, and design to mark regional and, at times, village identity. They fall into two categories: work aprons and festive aprons. These are festive aprons, which would be worn for holiday, holiday, community, and family celebrations. These aprons originally had a symbolic meaning—protection of a young woman’s maidenhood—is suggested by the choreography of wedding dances in various regions, for example, Podravina.

4. A SPINNING WHEEL, DISTAFF, AND SPINDLIES

A traditional Croatian Welcome is: “Welcome, preslica, and Čepelica—of silk, preferably black, embroidered with silver or gold wrapped thread, and as a gift. These aprons are of relatively recent origin.

5. SLAVONIJA

Slavonja is the “breadbasket” of Croatia, and, because of its agricultural wealth and prosperity, was throughout its history a much sought after region and trading partner. This prosperity continued to be a characteristic of the region. The most all regions of Croatia, with a diversity of structure, color, and design to mark regional and, at times, village identity. How she ties it, and what colors and decorations she uses usually tell whether she is a younger or older maiden, married woman, or widow. She may be seen wearing a different style for everyday wear, normal holiday wear, and for festive occasions.

6. PRIGEOJE AND ZAGORJE

The villages of Prigorje and Zagorje offer a comparison between three remote rural villages and those closer to towns and cities. Fine, home loomed linen and cotton, needleworked decoration, pleating as a fashion statement, and commercially purchased ribbons and scarves nearer the towns and cities. Fine, home loomed linen and cotton, needleworked decoration, pleating as a fashion statement, and commercially purchased ribbons and scarves nearer the towns and cities. Fine, home loomed linen and cotton, needleworked decoration, pleating as a fashion statement, and commercially purchased ribbons and scarves nearer the towns and cities.
style of color and design which incorporates the Mother Earth goddess in geometric form. The BANJA blouse illustrates western influences, which brought white into greater general use than as widow’s clothing and introduced needle lace and crocheted lace as major design elements. 

8. JASTREBARSKO AREA
Villages near the Jastrebarsko area continue to illustrate the diversity so characteristic of Croatian folk dress. Pleating continues as an element of decoration, the structure of the garment now also includes a sleeveless jumper, a shortened bodice with unusual sleeve patterns, and color carries specific messages of village identity and social status. The white of ČEČE (Stijela noktis) is an example of intricate needlework around the neckline, shoulder area, and apron. Called namirianica, it is worked on top of hand smocking. A 16th century portrait of nobility’s Beatrice Frankopan shows her headdress worked in this style of needlework.

KUPINEC folk dress illustrates the symbolism of style and color to indicate the social identity of women within their community. The red linear design, known as žutom, is worn by young women of marriageable age and, with the addition of the headdress, by women in their year of marriage. After their firstborn, the design becomes figural, and they may no longer wear this particular hue of red. Red (crveno) symbolizes life-giving powers, good health, happiness, and good fortune. Generally, unadorned white is for mourning and is worn upon the death of a close family member, on Good Friday, All Souls Day, and on other occasions of sadness. Advancing age, with its diminished life-giving powers, requires the wearing of shaded colors and, for older widows, black. The folding pattern of the Kupinec apron is prescribed by tradition.

A regional characteristic of the Jastrebarsko area and its environs is the back vertical mini pleating of the skirt, which must be repeated after every laundering. This style of pleating is known as žifinje.

9. VRILEKA
The ancient pre Christian symbols are much in evidence on the folk dress of Vrileka, and the isolation of the mountains provided for the safekeeping of old traditions. Dress embroidery, apron and vest symbols, and cowry shell beads speak of creation, sustenance, nurturing, and protection of life: stylized goddess and daughter figure with rhomb shaped field; sun circle; and triangular lined snake or wolf’s teeth designs as protective amulets. All are fitting designs for woman, who is perceived as creator, nurturer, and protector of life.

Headdress denotes a woman’s social status. A single simple wool scarf is usually worn, but sometimes a traditional red hat (crvena kapa). When she becomes engaged, she decorates the red hat with the “eye” of a peacock feather, a symbolic protection against evil. Married women wear a similar head scarf; however, it is worn over a fabric covered triangular form. The triangular shape, an ancient symbol of a protective deity, is another amulet against misfortune. Perhaps centuries of defense against the Ottoman invasions resulted in these much used protective symbols.

10. BARANJA
Bound by two rivers, the folk dress of Baranja follows two basic styles which are appropriately identified as Fodunar (along the Drava River in the west) and Fodunaroska (along the Duna or Danube River in the east). Distinguishing features are to be found in the winter wear and in the hats: one highly decorated woven wool skirt and apron and a square shaped hat for the former; separate front and back woven wool aprons and a round shaped hat for the latter. Both styles bear a striking resemblance to the western Ukrainian folk dress along the Carpathian Mountains.

The traditional characteristics of the entire region of Baranja include home loomed wool aprons in a linear design, vertical needle lace decoration in the sleeves, various birds interspersed with floral embroidered in horizontal rows and vertical columns on various parts of the white linen dress in red, blue, black and green mercerized cotton thread. 

11. KARASJEVO
The village of Karasjevo is home to the descendants of the oldest known Croatian Diaspora. Located in the Romanian Banat area near Resite (Belcice), Karasjevo and six other villages trace their migration and origins to the 14th century. Croatians who left their homes in what is today, central Bosnia. Their folk dress indicates proof of their original homeland. The stylized, very rich, detailed, dense silk thread embroidery designs are replete with goddess/life imagery, and match designs found in the traditional folk dress of Bosnia, Konavle, Dalmatia, and Žumberak, all areas whose people were touched by Eastern Byzantine and oriental Turkish influences. Similar intense colors and the dense embroidery using cross stitch and counted flat stitch are also found in Dalmatia. Garments are made of bleached home loomed linen, wool, and sheepskin, with vests and jackets trimmed with leather appliqué. Note the use of close pleating to effect a slim skirt.

12. BOSNA (BOSNIA)
Christian and Moslem Croatians have lived as neighbors for centuries in Bosnia, the legacy of Ottoman rule, making their individual identities known through the color and style of their clothing. The exhibited folk dress is that of a Christian woman. The long tunic, octogonal skirt, and cowry shell belt speak of creation, sustenance, nurturing, and protection of life: stylized goddess and daughter figure with rhomb shaped field; sun circle; and triangular lined snake or wolf’s teeth designs as protective amulets. All are fitting designs for woman, who is perceived as creator, nurturer, and protector of life.

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EXHIBIT
Symbolic Beauty: Croatian Textile Designs
An exhibit of costumes and textiles from the private collection of Stjepan Vlahovich of Columbus, Ohio
February 3 to March 30th, 2005
Clara Frittsche Library
Notre Dame College
4545 College Road
South Euclid, OH 44121
(216) 373-5267

TEXT: Fran Babic, Curator

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Cover Piece: Embroidery detail on blouse sleeve from a woman’s folk dress, Posavina region.