

*Špela Šubic*

## **NIKO KRALJ'S PRESENTATION PANELS DEPICTING HIS DESIGNS FOR THE STOL FACTORY, EARLY 1950s**

### **Zusammenfassung**

Die besprechene Präsentationskartons wurden wahrscheinlich verwendet, um Produktprototypen zu bewerben, die Niko Kralj für die Stol-Fabrik entworfen hatte. Zum Zeitpunkt ihrer Entstehung waren sie von sekundärer Bedeutung, da die Fabrik das Design und den Prototyp bevorzugte, sowie die Entscheidung, ob das dargestellte Produkt serienmäßig produziert werden sollte. Aufgrund ihres Alters, ihrer Seltenheit, des Zeitgeistes, der instabilen

Techniken und der abgebildeten Produkte sind sie zu einem Gegenstand von außergewöhnlichem Wert geworden. In den 1950er Jahren wandte sich die traditionell starke Holzverarbeitung den Trends zu, die das Bewusstsein für die Lebensqualität in der neuen politischen Ökonomie stärkten und das Design als eigenständigen Beruf förderten. Die vorliegenden Präsentationskartons sind gleichzeitig ein Beweis dafür, daß nicht nur ein technischer Entwurf oder Foto eines Produkts wichtig sind, sondern auch seine plastische Visualisierung.

**Keywords:** airbrush, photocollage, Niko Kralj, chair, industrial design

### **Introduction**

**T**his study focuses on cardboard presentation panels that show several pieces of furniture in a combination of photocollages and airbrush. The furniture was designed by Niko Kralj, and the presentation panels are kept in the Museum of Architecture and Design (henceforth MAO).

The presentation panels present one of the phases in the complex process of developing an industrial product, which includes sketches, plans, models, prototypes and many other construction and aesthetic checks. When (if) the object reaches its production process, the development processes

are often forgotten, or they become unimportant for the public, author and the manufacturer. These panels are therefore a rare existing side-product from the backstage of the creative, production and possibly even sales process of a critical furniture factory, the first in the territory of former Yugoslavia to have introduced a regular work position for an industrial designer: the Stol factory. They represent a valuable document of an essential part of design history, when design in Yugoslavia first became a profession in the 1950s. As the first professional industrial designer in the country, Niko Kralj became an essential factor in the endeavours to establish design as a profession in its own right.

The presentation panels could have been intended for further use: one possibility is that various typographical interventions would be added to create advertisements. If this was to be the case, the “floating” objects and the composition with the mystical void make sense. One thing we know for certain is that they are a result of a precise and targeted creative process. If we assume that they were created for promotional purposes, we have to view the result as an object of visual communication or graphic design.

However, they could be intended merely for an internal presentation, for instance, for the wholesale retailers during a strategic meeting. Alternatively, they could have played a part in the designer’s early ambitious attempts to present his prototypes to the management. Only two of the eight objects have been produced in significant volumes: the Rex 120 and the foldable stool.

## Aspects of technique

With their combination of techniques and artistic expression, these works represent a novelty in the industrial design collection of Slovenian authors. In our search for comparable material we have failed to find any similar works within the MAO collections or similar institutions in Slovenia. Not merely in the design or technical collections, we have not even found anything similar in the art collections from the early 1950s.

We noticed the presentation panels during our preparations for the Niko Kralj exhibition,<sup>1</sup> as we were systematically cross-checking all available documentary materials. We noticed them because of their contents, but we became especially attentive due to their fragile state, because the photographs were becoming unglued in certain places, and some parts of the cardboard

were covered in differently coloured dust patches. Our assumption that these patches are mould will need to be confirmed by experts. Before they arrived at the museum, the presentation panels were stored amongst printed matter and manuscripts in a poorly insulated loft, which was also accessible to rodents. This could be one of the reasons for the stains that appear on all presentation panels.

We are currently discussing the restoration and conservation analysis and procedures with the restoration department at the Archives of the Republic of Slovenia.

Even though they essentially are documentary material, we have – as a result of their rarity, technique and documentary value – categorized them as “musealia” almost seventy years after they were created.

The MAO design collection revolves around awarded objects from the international comparative exhibition Biennial of Design.<sup>2</sup> In accordance with the tendencies at the time,<sup>3</sup> it was originally known as the “industrial design collection”, which solely contained finished products. Through the years many other exceptional design products, models and prototypes were added to it.

As MAO is permanently collecting items that could offer an insight into high quality design, larger quantities of unselected materials are occasionally gifted to the museum, which was also the case with Kralj’s legacy. As he was the key figure of industrial design in Slovenia, we accepted the entire collection and only later started dividing between the professional and private archive, the latter being returned to his relatives. The objects that remained in the museum were divided into musealia and documentation.

With their discovery, the presentation panels obtained a new value as they depict models or prototypes of models, most of

1 M. ČELIK et al., *Niko Kralj: The Unknown Famous Designer*, ed. by B. Predan and Š. Šubic, <Museum of Architecture and Design, 15<sup>th</sup> December 2011–4<sup>th</sup> March 2012> (Ljubljana: Museum of Architecture and Design = Muzej za arhitekturo in oblikovanje, 2012).

2 The international comparative design exhibition, organized continuously since 1963, is today known as the Biennial of Design. Since 1972 it has been organized by the Architectural Museum of Ljubljana (today known as MAO).

3 In the 1950s, industrialization was considered to be progress, so design moved from handcrafts and unique items to industrial and large series production.

which have not been preserved. Not only did they become musealia due to their industrial and graphic design value, but they also became a sort of nostalgic and trendy document.

With slight deviations, all eight panels are roughly of the same dimensions and format. With the exception of one that is vertical, all the rest are horizontal panels, slightly larger than A4 format. The technique used is photo collage, in most cases combined with airbrush. In all eight examples, the central object is the presented piece of furniture, which has been manually cut out from a photograph. Six of them have been reworked with dramatic shading, which – in a combination of shadows and the airbrush spray – created a three-dimensional effect. In the other two, which have been glued onto a white background, the shadow of the object was added with cut out raster paper. Six panels used black painted cardboard as the background surface, while the remaining two have a white background surface made from a softer type of cardboard. They were all covered with a thin semi-transparent sheet of tracing paper that was attached to the upper part at the back; however, with some of them, this has been torn off or unglued.

The combination of airbrush and photo collage techniques is impressive. We do not know whose decision this was, nor do we know who made the presentation panels. Taking into account the dramatic positioning they could serve as an advertisement, and it is possible that they were ready for print. The examples on the black background might have been created for a different purpose than those created on the white background, because they are stylistically somewhat different. As a comparison aid, we used expert and general public magazines from the time with contributions on interior design, contemporary design, and advertisements. Looking through the magazines *Arhitekt (Architect)*, *Les (Wood)*, *Naša žena (Our Woman)* with the supplement *Naš dom (Our Home)* printed between 1950

and 1960, confirmed our assumption that the combination of these two techniques was not used for advertising purposes at the time these panels were created.

### Eight presentation panels

In six examples, the object is realistically portrayed with a photograph, surrounded with an imaginary, almost space-like background, as a counterweight to which the object is defined in space with its strong shadow. The two objects presented on the white surface, which are shadowed by the cut out raster paper, are presented in a more two-dimensional way, almost dry and technical in their presentation. In both cases we wonder whether the final presentation panels remained unpublished because professional photographs without any later interventions were simply a better solution. In 1956, the magazine *Arhitekt* published the professional photographs taken by Janez Kališnik,<sup>4</sup> a photographer specialized in photographing design and architecture, alongside a competition report (which was a part of a larger project with the final goal of creating the exhibition *Flat for our conditions*). The quality of his photographs surpassed the artistic expression of our panels in all aspects.

*Armchair Rex 120 with a model* (Fig. 1) is the only presentation panel to include a person. The purpose of this panel was to show the object's usability, present it in a lively way, in its best light, as three-dimensionally as possible. The figure adds drama, which cannot be found in the other examples. It is compositionally sound – the shadow of the object is cut off – it reaches into the very edge of the panels and beyond. The background has been painted black, while the airbrush spray is white. One can still see that a thin semi-transparent sheet of tracing paper was attached to the top back as protection, but this has been torn off at some

<sup>4</sup> 'Competition for Rational Furniture', in: *Arhitekt*, 18-19 (1956), 33-35.





Fig. 1: *Armchair Rex 120 with a model*; 24.5 × 21; cardboard, photograph, airbrush. Inv. No. 534:LJU;0037055.

stage. Taking into account the different motif, this could be the result of more frequent use. Alongside the edges of the black surface of the shadow, there are visible traces of drawing pins, which held the stencil in place while the cardboard was being airbrushed. Slight dust stains are noticeable on the top part of the panel.

The presented chair was the first version of Rex that went into mass production. In order to create this chair, Kralj used his patented plywood curved in two directions, which at the time represented a technological as well as design challenge. Contrary to the later, much more popular version, this version was not foldable, but it had a different practical characteristic: the chairs could be stacked. The armrests can be lifted to the backrest which enables one to lower the top chair onto the legs of the bottom chair.

*Coffee table* (Fig. 2) is the only panel to have a bright shadow to the object. The stencil used to create the shadow was placed against the cardboard before this was painted black, which is confirmed by the traces of the drawing pins. In opposition to the



Fig. 2: *Coffee table*; 24.5 × 33; cardboard, photograph, airbrush, thin semi-transparent tracing paper. Inv. No. 534:LJU;0037060

first piece, this one and all the rest present only the object, which has been extremely precisely cut out from a photograph and glued onto a seemingly endless space, defined merely by the shadow.

In the years of following and researching Kralj's work, we have not come across this object. We have concluded that it must have been made merely as a prototype version. Its special characteristic lies in the upwards turned edges of the table surface. This panel presents important proof of the existence of an object that no longer exists.

On the panel *Chair with a slatted backrest* (Fig. 3), the traces of the drawing pins indicate that the stencil for the shadows was, as was the case in most examples, attached to the already black background. The small object appears somewhat lost within the given format.

The bottom part of the chair is constructed in the same way as the foldable stool, but with an added backrest. The slats that enabled the plywood to be bent into two directions could have become an anatomical and aesthetic feature also in other pieces. This panel is the only presentation of this chair to be found so far.

The size of the depicted *Deckchair Rex* (Fig. 4) stands out in comparison to the format of the cardboard. Compositionally, the author considered the object and its shadow as a whole.





Fig. 3: *Chair with a slatted backrest*; 24.7 × 30; cardboard, photograph, airbrush, thin semi-transparent tracing paper. Inv. No. 534:LJU;0037059



Fig. 5: *Rex Chair*; 24.7 × 30; cardboard, photograph, airbrush, thin semi-transparent tracing paper. Inv. No. 534:LJU;0037056



Fig. 4: *Deckchair Rex*; 24.7 × 32.7; cardboard, photograph, airbrush, thin semi-transparent tracing paper. Inv. No. 534:LJU;0003593

The dust stains at the top are intense, and they also spread across the photograph and the thin semi-transparent tracing paper. The white stains are less intense. The photograph is very precisely cut out along the slats of the deckchair, and the shadowing shows the same precision. A larger part of the photograph became unstuck over time.

The deckchair Rex was obviously a derivative of the idea with the plywood curved in two directions and the continuation of the parallel slats motif. We cannot judge whether the deckchair prototype was developed at the same time as the Rex armchair

or whether the chair already a market success by that time. However, we do know that it was never produced in any large quantities, as the deckchair never appeared anywhere else but in the rare publications of photographs.

The object *Chair Rex* (Fig. 5) and its shadow are once again treated as a whole, for it is the shadow in combination with the airbrush application that is a necessary part of the three-dimensional appearance. Today, a comparable presentation would be created by computer rendering. The same dust stains as before appear along the upper edge. The perforation of the photograph along the sides of the backrest is truly miniscule, and one can still see the airbrush effect through the tiny holes.

The chair is of a squarer shape than the armchair. The improved version went into production, while this photograph clearly shows a prototype.

The brown stains appear predominantly on the black background around the *Little Indian* (Fig. 6) photograph near the backrest, while the white stains appear on the upper and left edge of the cardboard.

From the point of view of its composition, and taking into account the format, the relatively small chair is placed in the centre of the aura, the role of which has in this case almost taken over from the object itself.



Fig. 6: *Little Indian*; 24.7 × 29.7; cardboard, photograph, airbrush, thin semi-transparent tracing paper. Inv. No. 534:LJU;0037058

'Little Indian' is a foldable chair. MAO has one prototype with armrests and two without them. One of them carries a production sticker from the factory, which means that at least a small series was manufactured. Technologically interesting is the 'Indian plume' made out of curved plywood leaves, which is supposed to soften the contact between the back and the backrest. This chair never worked statically, which might be the reason that it was never produced in a large series.

Simple photocollage *Foldable Stool in a box* (Fig. 7) does not have a dark background; the base is made from a thinner cardboard, and it has no airbrush interventions. The photograph has a few brown stains and lesions. The depth of field is achieved with the added raster paper alongside the right and lower part of the photograph.

This is the only example that we know to have been published.<sup>5</sup> Compositionally it is not well thought out, but the publication reveals that this was not relevant as only the central motif with the shadowing was used.

The photograph reveals a valuable piece of information: a printed sticker on the box, showing the text "For the exhibition of the industrially manufactured chair in Mala

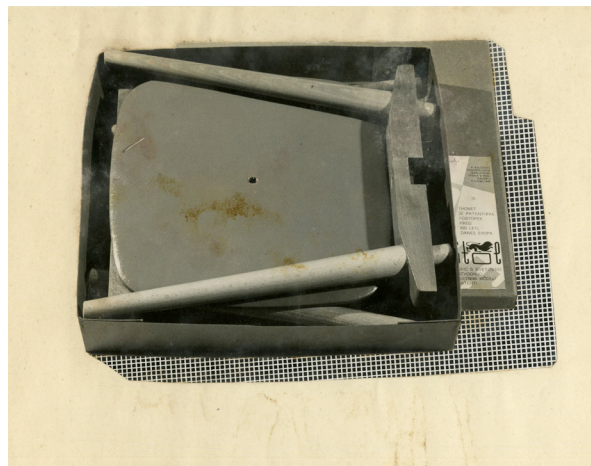


Fig. 7: *Foldable Stool in a box*; 21.5 × 32; cardboard, photograph, raster paper. Inv. No. 534:LJU;0037061

Galerija in Ljubljana" and "Thonet patented the procedure 100 years ago, and today Stol steps ... (along)side it into global ...(pro)duction...own models...(p)atents."<sup>6</sup> For this panel, we have a *post quem non* date (i.e., the date of the exhibition).

Niko Kralj was the curator of the exhibition in Mala Galerija between 25 January and 7 February 1954.<sup>7</sup> This sticker indicates that the stool could have been bought there in the box. The stool was deliberately not photographed in its assembled state, but in parts, folded within the box. The trends at the time was to economize with storage and transport space, which led to the do-it-yourself assembly. This was best monetized by Ikea, which started introducing the system at the same time as Kralj. His most famous work – the foldable Rex chair – was created with the idea of the economical use of space. The construction of the stool meant that the user had to tighten a single screw, which is all it took for the stool to achieve total construction stability of a working household stool made from solid wood and curved plywood covered in polyvinyl. Even though it was industrially produced, it has become a rare find.

5 N. KRALJ, 'Moderno pohištvo in nove konstrukcije', in: *Les*, 6/7, VI (1954), 101 - 106

6 "K razstavi industrijsko izdelanega stola v Mali galeriji v Ljubljani"; and: "Thonet je patentiral postopek pred 100 leti, danes stopa Stol ... (vš)tric v svetovno ...(proiz)vodnjo ...(I)astnimi modeli...(p)atenti."

7 G. B., 'Razstava »100 let industrijskega stola«, in *Arhitekt*, 11 (1954), 19.





Fig. 8: *Mosquito*; 24.7 × 34.7; cardboard, photograph, raster paper, thin semi-transparent tracing paper.  
Inv. No. 534:LJU;0037057

In the case of the *Mosquito* (Fig. 8) photocollage, the base is also made from thinner, white cardboard, while the shadow is cut out from printed raster paper. The grey and brown dust stains are the most intense between the photograph and the shadow. The composition is better thought out, but as we had ascertained in the previous example, it is irrelevant.

The sitting surface made from curved plywood is interesting, but represents a construction disadvantage, as it is made from two halves, screwed together on the bottom side of the seat. The four legs and the backrest are also screwed into the same part. The cute shape that gave the chair its name did not truly work in practice. A few prototypes were created, and they can be seen in various publications. It is in production today, with certain construction improvements, but with a worse visual appearance.

### Considering a broader frame

In the modern era, the airbrush technique established itself at the end of the 1920s. Man Ray was one of the first artists to use it. By the next decade, this technique had been established in graphic design and was used regularly for decorating everyday objects. Today, it has been substituted in fine

art with spray cans,<sup>8</sup> in design by computer programmes, and it is most broadly used for decorating cars and motorbikes.

Art had established a new technique and pathed the way to new implementations in various fields. The same holds true for photocollages. Various types of experimentation with photographs appeared practically at the same time as photography itself. At first accepted as not a very serious artistic expression, photomontages and photocollages were used as a witty idea or a subversion. Man Ray was a pioneer also in this technique, and he was followed by Bauhaus and the penetrating Hannah Höch and Marianne Brandt. Photocollages were at the time so unusual that the artists were considered engineers, for they were seen to build and assemble their works.<sup>9</sup>

Slovene constructivists started using photocollages early on, and they have been long overlooked by conservative public and critics, even though the photocollages by Avgust Černigoj and Eduard Stepančič were reproduced in a special issue of the magazine *Der Sturm* as early as 1929.<sup>10</sup> As regards the contents, they were far from our examples; however, they clearly show that the technique was known in our territory.

As regards the contents, two photographs can be compared to ours, both from Bauhaus. One was made for the needs of promoting Breuer's Wassily armchair and was made by Herbert Bayer in 1927,<sup>11</sup> while the other was made by a Bauhaus student, Erich Consemüller.<sup>12</sup> The older photographs made much better use of the language of photography, its possibilities of expression, including additional interventions. In

8 An example of a work of fine art: Ana Sluga, *Triptych I*, 2016, acrylic and spray on canvass; <Time without innocence, Moderna galerija, 31<sup>st</sup> January 2019–31<sup>st</sup> March 2019> (Ljubljana, Moderna galerija, 2019).

9 M. FRIZOT, *Photomontage. Experimental Photography Between the Wars* (London: Photofile, 1991), 3.

10 *Der Sturm*, 19. Jahrgang / 10. Heft, Berlin, January 1929.

11 *Das Bauhaus. Alles ist design*, ed. by M. Kries et al. <Weil am Rhein: Vitra design museum, 26. September 2015 bis 28. Februar 2016; Bonn: Bundeskunsthalle, 1. April bis 14. August, 2016>, 376.

12 W. HERZOGENRATH, *Bauhausfotografie*, (Bonn: Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen), 46

comparison to them, the lady on the arm-rest of the Rex 120 seems slightly on the conservative side. Differences should not be sought merely between the authors, but also in the very different spirit of the times in which the compared works were created.

It is a fact that both techniques, the photocollage and airbrush, were practically not used during the 1950s. They became established in fine art in the 1920s, and they experienced a revival only in the 1960s.

With an overview of the graphic design production<sup>13</sup> during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we can conclude that our panels also differ greatly from contemporary graphic design production.

The contents reflect the most creative and original period of the designer Niko Kralj: the first years of his employment in the Stol factory (1952–1955). The panels depict furniture created from curved plywood, which was in step with the contemporary production of the most prominent designers of the period.<sup>14</sup>

Kralj knew what was happening in international design. He was acquainted with the most modern technologies and was sensitive to style changes, which he adjusted to the environment and his expression. Did he consider the presentation panels to be an outdated technique compared to the contents, and is this why they remained hidden from the public?

### **Špela ŠUBIC**

Museum of Architecture and Design, Rusjanov trg 7, SI - 1000 Ljubljana, Slovenia

spela.subic@mao.si

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13 PH. B. MEGGS, *A History of Graphic Design* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc, 1998).

14 All photocollages are part of the MAO collection.