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THE RENOVATION OF THE URBANC DEPARTMENT STORE: ACID ETCHED GLASS PANELS OF URBANC DEPARTMENT STORE: THE PROBLEM OF RESTORATION

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Abstract

Glass panels decorated with the technique of acid etching were fairly widespread in the architecture of Ljubljana in the second half of the 19th century. Ljubljana is still remarkable for being one of the few cities, in which etched glass panels have been preserved in their original location or at least in museum storage. Etched glass, decorated mainly with patterns, derived from historical styles, represented an indispensable piece of equipment in public and residential architecture. At the turn of the century as well Art Nouveau features started to infiltrate existing forms and ornaments such as stylised plants, flowers, etc., drawn in elegant Secession lines.

The present paper deals with the conservation principles for this unique heritage in the last decades of the 20th century with the main focus on the renovation of the Urbanc department store and the reconstruction of acid etched glass panels in it.

Introduction

In the 19th century, especially in its last quarter, Ljubljana underwent a transformation from a small provincial centre into a modern national capital. A series of new building types was introduced in Ljubljana, which affected the appearance of its streets and squares. The town boundaries expanded and population increased rapidly. The structure of society changed and was marked by the cultural revival and new inventions. All of this was tied in with industrialization and the new economy.

The most important turning point in the development of Ljubljana was the devastating earthquake that struck the town in 1895. Intensive reconstruction began immediately and in the following fifteen years the image of the town changed more than in any previous period. Thanks to the very ambitious municipal politics, the city changed its urban form and architecture, but it also improved its economic and cultural role, and consecutively the mentality of the population started to change. Ljubljana completely changed over a fifteen year period, developing from a provincial town into a modern city with all the important attributes of a national capital. These included a governmental palace and other administrative buildings, theatres, a museum, hotels, and also the first department store as a symbol of the new consumer society.

The Urbanc department store

In 1903 Felix Urbanc, a respected wholesaler of textile fabrics, built the first department store in Ljubljana. The palace was erected on what is today the Prešeren square, which evolved from a suburban crossroads into a new modern urban space shortly after the earthquake in 1895 and became the new heart of the city. New modern buildings were erected in that period on the square – the Mayer, Frisch and Seunig Houses, whilst the Hauptmann House, one of the few that survived the earthquake, was modernised.

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Urbanc appointed the famous Graz architect Friedrich Sigmund (1856 - 1917) to draw up plans for the new mercantile palace. The architect had experience with commercial architecture. In collaboration with the Fellner & Helmer practice from Vienna he had already built the Kastner & Öhler department store in Graz. It determined a new scale of commercial architecture in Graz and introduced a new building type, that of the department store with a unified sales space that was linked with the surrounding sales gallery, built with new materials and fronted with large display windows. It also introduced new secessionist forms into the traditional historic architecture of Habsburg monarchy of the late 19th century, which provoked quite a scandal in the traditional environment of Graz. On the contrary Sigmund's purest art nouveau building in Ljubljana was well accepted as being "interesting, perfectly modern and charming". It was a kind of prototype, which was also copied later on in other cities of the monarchyⁱ.

The main single-axis façade, which is a mere 5.5 metres in width, is located on the corner and faces the Prešeren Square. The exterior distinguishes the palace from contemporary Viennese architecture. The main entrance portal is similar to the Parisian department stores and extends over the ground - floor and mezzanine. The canopy above the entrance has the shape of stylized blossom with open petals made of glass and wrought iron. The canopy is supported by wrought-iron brackets in vegetal form; a decoratively shaped brass plate with the name of the store is placed between them. The design of the palace has no match in contemporary Austrian architecture; it was inspired by the Franco-Belgian Art Nouveau, with which Sigmund became acquainted during his visit to Paris in 1900.

The three - storied palace combines the commercial and the residential part, which is clearly reflected in its exterior. The lower part is dedicated to the commercial program with large display windows. It differs from the upper two apartment floors, which are very similar to contemporary residential houses. The fashionable façade is inspired by Viennese architecture. It is decorated with Wagnerian decorative elements and with motifs of Mercury, such as the caduceus, concentrated beneath the eaves. The large projecting roof, supported by iron brackets accentuates the appearance of monumentality. On the top of the main façade there is an attic surmounted by a neo Baroque statue of Mercury, the Roman god of trade and protector of merchants. He is leaning on the bow of the ship with a bale of cloth and has a raised hand to invite passersby to shop.

The courtyard was originally covered with a roof, made of glass and wrought iron. There was a garage with apartment for an employee on the north side of the courtyard, which was accessible through a passageway.



1.Urbanc palace around 1920, archive ZVKDS, OE Ljubljana

The interior is stylistically a true French department store in miniature, which is unique in Slovene Secessionist architecture. The main sales space is located centrally on the corner and has the form of symmetrical pentagon in plan. It extends over two floors. A monumental staircase is placed directly in the axis of the main entrance. It begins with a wide landing, curved on both sides and climbs to a central landing halfway between the ground floor and mezzanine. There it divides into two flights, which curve in elegant lines towards the gallery. The staircase is placed between two pairs of columns, which support the ceiling. A

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female statue, the personification of trade, is set on the arch at the level of the floors. The original furniture, almost entirely preserved, was manufactured in the famous joinery workshop of Anton Irschnika in Graz.

Development of the store with textile fabric to the socialist department store

Immediately after the Second World War, the palace became the property of the State in the process of nationalization. Initially it was managed by the Tkanina company, later by wholesaler Merkur. Centromerkur operated in it during the last few decades of the 20th century.

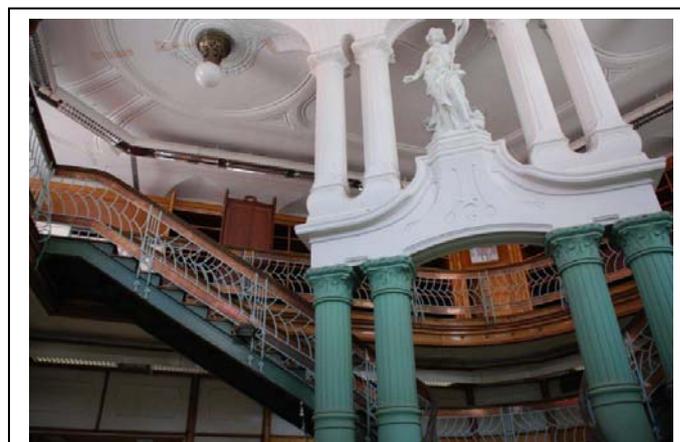
In this period the palace was considerably remodelled several times and radically altered in the interior. The roof was raised above the wings in order to gain some additional space for the management and administration of the store. Large reconstruction works, which caused the loss of important part of the heritage, were carried out in the 1960s. In that time the whole building, including the former residential part, was converted into a department store. The main stairs that were used by the owners were replaced by poorly designed new stairs and a lift. The courtyard that was originally covered with a glass and wrought iron roof, was overbuilt, the partitions between rooms were removed, the exterior wall was breached many times to join the new extension to the old palace.



2. Interior, photo: Miran Kambič

The renovation of the façade in 1980s was more sensible to the heritage values of palace. The restoration was supervised by the heritage agency. At that time the sandstone statue of Mercury was replaced with a polyester replica.

Despite all alterations, the central hall of the store preserved its authentic furniture. The Cabinets with opened shelves were only slightly modified. The upper parts were closed and covered with panels. Sales counters and freestanding mirrors were damaged, while etched glass panels that decorated the inner part of the shop windows almost disappeared. Only one acid etched glass panel remained intact under the piles of sales products. Unfortunately the furnishing in the part of the store in the ground floor of the south wing was lost.



3. Interior of the department store in 2008 (photo: Marija Režek Kambič, ZVKDS, OE Ljubljana)

Comprehensive renovation 2006-2010

In 2004 the building was returned to the heirs of the former owner, the Kosler family, in the long process of denationalisation. They decided to renovate the building in its original beauty and splendour for the original function.

The owners had already worked closely with the Institute for the Protection of Cultural Heritage in the decision making process. A conservation plan was drawn up by the Institute, which established the

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policies and gave the guidelines for the renovation to the architect.

The main objective of the restoration was to maintain the basic historical values and authenticity of the building as a whole, and at the same time to consider the actual building regulations (fire precautions, consolidation of the construction...) and requirements of the shop keeper.

Conservation plan included detailed instructions for the restoration, precisely defined conservation restoration methods and plans for reconstruction of key elements, which were lost or damaged during the previous alterations and physical decay. The main goals were to achieve the best result with minimum intervention, to preserve the character and the greatest values in the palace.

The restoration of the façade was completed without any surprises. An experienced master façadier reconstructed the destroyed plaster elements using traditional techniques and materials. Most of the decorative elements, casts, profiled and modeled parts were in very good condition. Therefore only cleaning and minor additions and repairs were undertaken. The statue of Mercury at the top of the Palace was reconstructed in artificial stone. The attachment of statue that weighed more than three ton to the top of the roof, supported by original wooden construction system, was a major challenge for the restorer and the builders.

The casement windows that were typical of the contemporary apartment houses have been replaced and the original handles were reused. It soon became apparent that, new installations without adaption could not be carried out in the main entrance, which was made from oak. Therefore a new vestibule of minimalistic design was added on to the façade. This was a compromise solution between demands of the user to optimize accessibility and the protection of the fabric.

Restoration works (original equipment, furniture; furnishings included stucco work, staircase...) were carried out by skilled specialists - academic restorers and craftsmen of different profiles.

Some compromises had to be made on the request of the merchant. The cabinets were adapted; the inner shelves, originally made from raw pine boards were replaced by white gloss finished boards. Different installation systems were hidden behind the cabinets due to the reduced depth of shelves. Parquet flooring was laid in the gallery of the store as was originally the case, whilst stone flooring was used in the rest of the palace.

Acid etched glass panels

Glass panels decorated with the technique of acid etching were fairly widespread in Ljubljana architecture at the turn of the century. Etched glass windows were indispensable equipment in public and residential architecture, which is quite interesting, considering that there were no workshops producing etched glass in Ljubljana. Most of the etched glass in Ljubljana was imported from other countries of the monarchy, mainly from Vienna and Bohemia, which was the major glass producing area of the Austro-Hungarian Empireⁱⁱ. Many glass factories promoted their products through sales catalogues, which circulated all over the monarchy and where consumers could choose the motifs. Thus we can, for example, find the motifs that are etched on glass panels decorating the Bellevue Hotel, the swing door in the City savings Bank and othersⁱⁱⁱ in the catalogue of the Viennese firm of Herb & Schawb, while the etched glass windows of the Grand Hotel Union were produced in the workshop of Rechwald in Pilsen.

In the first decades of 20th century the art of glass acid etching reflected the rise of bourgeoisie, but it quickly fell into oblivion after the First World War. This was a result of the political changes that cut the ties with Vienna and other cities of the old monarchy, but was also a result of the changes of fashion and taste in architecture that brought functionalism and modernism.

The historicist tradition and stylistic features of the Italian or German neo-Renaissance and sometimes the neo-Baroque predominated the architecture of Ljubljana up to the outbreak the First World War. Historicist motifs, such as tendrils, garlands, cartouches, meshes etc. also prevailed on etched glass panels.

Almost all of the new public buildings that were built in the last quarter of the 19th century (the Provincial Theatre, the National Community Hall, the Palace of the Provincial Government, the Philharmonic Palace etc.) were decorated with acid etched glass panels, mainly with historicist motifs. It was only at the turn of the century that Art Nouveau motifs such as stylized plant, flowers, landscapes, etc., drawn in elegant Secession lines also appeared, but more as an exception than as a rule. Innovations in design were introduced at a slow pace, and with no real enthusiasm, as was also the case with the architecture as a whole^{IV}.



4. Acid etched glass panel with Art nouveau motifs (photo: Marija Režek Kambič, ZVKDS, OE Ljubljana, photo: Carmen Narobé, documentation MGML)

Examples of conservation principles

Ljubljana is remarkable for being one of the few cities, in which etched glass panels have been preserved. This rich artistic heritage might also have survived thanks to the circumstances that the city was not bombed during the Second World War, whilst general maintenance of villas, apartment



5. Swing door with acid etched glass panels (photo: Marija Režek Kambič, ZVKDS, OE

houses and public buildings throughout the postwar period mainly comprised small repairs and the replacement of broken etched glass panels with ordinary panels. The unique heritage of etched glass windows was not much appreciated until the last decades of the 20th century when it was included in comprehensive renovation. Since then different approaches have been used, including preservation and maintenance *in situ*, replacement of originals with copies and preservation of originals in museums.

Maintaining of original acid etched glass panels

The windows in the apartment buildings that faced the courtyard and the doors in the entrance hall and staircase were usually glazed with acid etched glass panels. Thus, for example, the etched glass panels decorate the swinging door in the entrance hall in the apartment building at Beethovnova no.9.

Geometric patterns motifs composed of rectangles, squares and straight lines executed in rough and smooth plaster are reminiscent of the Vienna secession, and mainly limited to façade decorations.

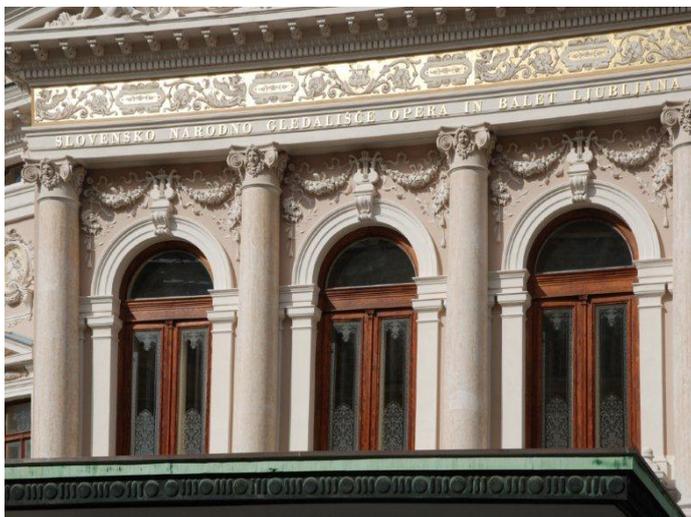
Traditional stylish forms prevailed as opposed to the modern geometric ornamental style in on exterior when motifs were selected for etched glass panels. The Renovation of the staircase

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included the restoration of the swing door with etched glass panels in the entrance hall. Initially glazed fields with etched glass panels bearing neo-Baroque figures of tendrils, but superseded with ordinary glass, were replaced with new ones. The motifs weren't reconstructed as a whole, although the selvedge running by sides was recreated in the sand blasting technique.

Preservation of original acid etched glass panels in original context

The old Provincial Theatre of Ljubljana (the modern Opera and Ballet Theatre) represented the highest quality creation of the late Historicism, *Gesamtkunstwerke* form as a joint product of several fields of art - architecture, fine and applied art. Its renovation was completed in 2010. The renovation followed the principle of maintaining the original in the part of the theatre open for public. Only conservation and restoration work were carried out here, including certain phases of functional modernization. The surviving original and fabric were retained intact.



6: Façade - windows glazed with etched glass panels (photo: Marija Režek Kambič, ZVKDS, OE Ljubljana)

Doubled casement wooden windows were restored, preserved etched glass panels were cleaned, cracked and lost elements were replaced by replicas imitating the original design and using original technique of etching glass. This contributed considerably to the completeness of heritage values and the image of the theatre. The outer wings of the windows are glazed with etched glass panels, as part of the design of façade. They are noticed by passers more than by visitors. This kind of use carries a slightly lower risk of future harm by direct physical contact.

Replacement original acid etched glass panels with copies



7. Replicas of colored acid etched glass panel in staircase made in Nový Bor, Czech Republic (photo: Marija Režek Kambič, ZVKDS, OE Ljubljana)

The highest quality secessionist glass panels decorated with floral and vegetal and landscape motifs adorned the Grand hotel Union. The doors of the restaurants, cafes and façade of auditoriums facing the street were decorated with etched panels with stylized plant, landscape and flower motifs. In addition to the monochrome etched glass panels, this building also saw the use of coloured panels. This was ordinary glass coated with one or more layers of colored glass and gradually etched, which shone in myriad shades and ingeniously adorned the most prestigious rooms on the ground floor. In contrast to the other fittings, all the glass was imported from Bohemia. It was made by the famous Pilsen factory of A. Rhewald^v.

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The significant value of the etched glass panel was recognized in the refurbishment of the hotel in 1998. Only one original panel is preserved and is on display in the hotel lobby. All the other panels were deposited in the museum, and hotel's doors and windows were fitted with copies. Unfortunately the replicas of monochrome etched glass panel motifs were made with sand blasting. The drawing masterfully imitates the original technique, but the acid etched glass is much easier to maintain and the different tones of shading are clearer, than those of the sandblasted examples.

Preservation of the etched glass panels in the Museum storage



The presentation of the etched glass panels became an issue within the framework of the adaptation of the Printing House of the Catholic Press Society between 1997 and 2000. The building, erected in 1908, as the first industrial building in Ljubljana with a reinforced concrete inner frame construction and matchless secessionist furnishing in the interior, was converted into the Faculty of Law. Unfortunately only the facade designed with typical Wagnerian decorative motifs and casement windows, glazed with acid-etched panels decorated with stylized vegetal motifs (laurel leaves) were undamaged at the beginning of the project. Most of the secession furniture, lights, decorative paintings, known only from the old photographs, written records, etc., was already replaced and lost.

Unfortunately the interior of the building is not preserved and is completely modern without of any traces of the secessionist ambient, which resulted in the exclusion of reuse of etched glass panels in the renovation. Some of the panels with first-class secession vegetable motifs have been preserved in museum storage due to the initiative of a glassworker who still practices the ancient art of glass acid etching.

8. Acid etched glass panel (photo: Carmen Narobé, documentation MGLM)

The Etched glass windows of Urbanc - replicas of original acid etched glass panels with reconstructed motifs

Etched glass panels decorated the interiors of all the shop-windows on ground floor in the Urbanc department store. They create a kind of visual barrier between the exterior and the interior. These panels were recognized as one of the significant values of the Urbanc palace as a complete work of art. They are distinguished for their size (2m x 3m) and excellent Art nouveau floral motifs, presenting curved and bent leaves, buds and sprouts, blossoming towards the top. These panels were exceptional also for the high quality of the glass. It was very thick (7mm) - cast in double thickness, optically perfect ground and polished.

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Project - acid etched glass panels



9. Acid etched glass panel in 2009
(photo: Marija Režek Kambič, ZVKDS,
OE Ljubljana)

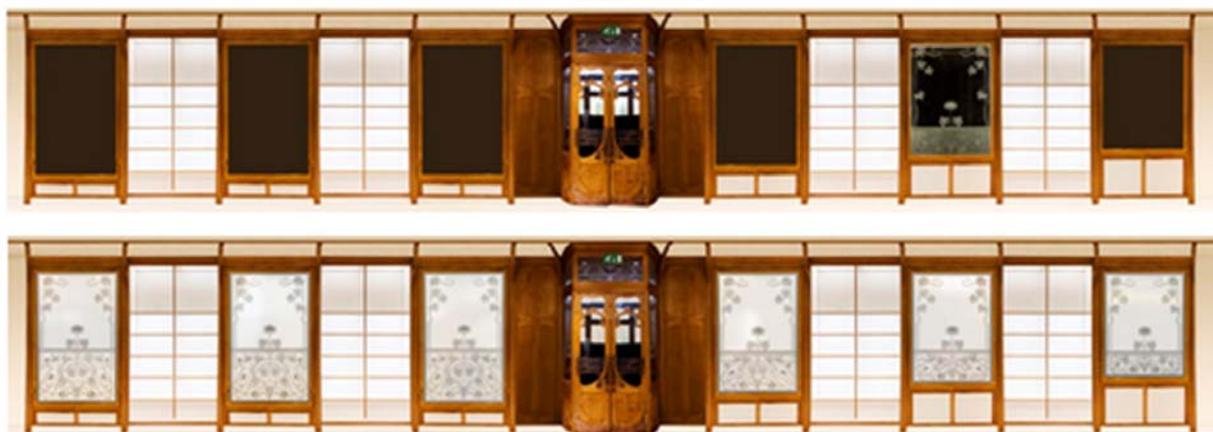
The reconstruction, that is the making of replicas of acid etched glass panels that were outstanding creations in the sense of an Art Nouveau craftsmanship, was one of the most difficult issues. As noted by the master in acid etching glass, Aleš Lombergar, the project is the culmination of his career.

A survey of the records provides invaluable data of the original store furniture, but photographs and drawings of the etched glass panels were not found among them. The reconstruction of six panels was undertaken on the basis of two panels, one preserved in the store and another one broken in pieces, preserved for more than two decades in the workshop of a glassworker in Ljubljana, who still uses the old technique of glass acid etching. This was the basis for the reconstruction of floral motifs. However, they had to be adapted to four different sizes of windows on the façade, which follows the line of Miklošičeva Street.

The process of reconstruction^{vi} started with the cleaning and scanning the complete panel and the fragments of the broken example. The fragments were digitally recomposed, and all the mistakes and errors on the drawings were retouched. Many drafts were made for lost two drawings, one for the smallest window in size and one for largest four ones, in accordance with the extant examples. The glassworker had to study precisely preserved motifs from the turn of the century in order to re-create the design of the missing compositions.

After making plans and drawings, samples of acid etched glass were produced in order to define precisely the procedure of etching. The goal was to recreate the best effect of drawing and shading of the master from the beginning of the 20th century. Each glass panel with resist mask had to be immersed in acid (350 l) three times in order to attain the effect of different shades ranging from clear and opaque areas of glass. This is precisely the technology, which was used in 1903. 6 mm toughened glasses was used, because 7 mm glass panels are no longer available on the market.

Originally these panels permitted the light come inside, but the owners on the contrary wanted to close the shop to the outside completely. Therefore the glass panels had to be brightened artificially to create



10. Plan for reconstruction by Aleš Lombergar

an impression of day light. The expected result was not achieved, although the lightening was installed by a specialist in exhibition installation. Only minimal intervention by darkening the background



11. The interior of the store (photo: Marija Režek)

would make etched glass panels more vivid. The representative of the high fashioned store expressed no interest in improving the presentation.

The restoration of the most remarkable Art Nouveau interior was covered by prominent media including National Television.

Conclusion

On the basis of the specific examples of the renovation of cultural heritage presented in previous text, it can easily be concluded that the sustainable preservation and presentations of etched glass panels requires the inventory and documentation as a preliminary. The acid etched glass panels are catalogued in public buildings, but the list of villas and apartment houses with etched glass panels in private

ownership is still incomplete. Each restoration or maintenance project requires preliminary studies, surveys, etc., in order to understand and specify the cultural value of heritage. It has to be noted that the establishment of a uniform methodology for conservation plans was associated with the preparation of plans and the documentation of the renovation of the Urbanc palace.

The presentation of the etched glass panels, which flooded the city at the turn of the century, is a key element for interpretation of the past. Preservation in the original location and context is high in narrative, but carries a high risk of future harm. Broken or damaged etched glass panels cannot be joined and used for glazing the window again.

The preservation of the originals with the completion of lost etched glass panels in their original location and context sustain their values especially in cultural heritage, which represents so-called total works of art. Is the replacement of the original with replicas for the purpose of ensuring the security and preservation of the original justified due to the diminishment of heritage values through separation in buildings, where etched glass panels form an integral part of significance?

Abrasive sandblasting is also a common technique for creating patterns in glass panels. The advantage of replicas made with technique of sandblasting is their accessibility and price. However, the abrasion of the glass surface by sandblasting cannot truthfully replicate all the tones of shading.

The other issue that usually arises is that of what to do with preserved original etched glass panels or works of statuary art that were removed from the original location. Removal to a museum has two sides, on one hand they are safely kept for future generations, but ability to access the exhibit is insufficient, if the exhibit does not form part of the permanent collection.

The art of etching glass has almost disappeared today and skilled craftsmen, capable of forming historical motifs, are also becoming rare. Without revival of the acid etched glass skills, it will not be possible to replace this unique evidence of the past with replicas, when they become vulnerable or are lost.

Much has to be done in the field of the promotion of this unique and fragile heritage, because acid etched glass panels are not very well known to general and expert public. The last exhibition that displayed photos of etched glass panels was that organised by curator/art historian Marija Železnik,

which took place in the City museum of Ljubljana in 1971. Some of the coloured acid etched panels from the Grand hotel Union were the part of the exhibition that took place as part of the European Heritage Days in 1998. These were also included in the local section of the Art Nouveau Réseau in Progress exhibition in 2006.

Interest by the broader public could also be raised through new exhibitions, lectures and other tools.

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ⁱ Mihelič B. (2010)

ⁱⁱ Štular H. (1984), p. 36.

ⁱⁱⁱ Mihelič B. (1998), p 43.

^{iv} Rovšnik B. (1980), p 29.

^v Mihelič B. (1998), p. 61.

^{vi} Lombergar A. (2012)