



PAST EXHIBITION

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Past  
Exhibition

# Fantastical Streets

## The Theatrical Posters of Boris Bućan

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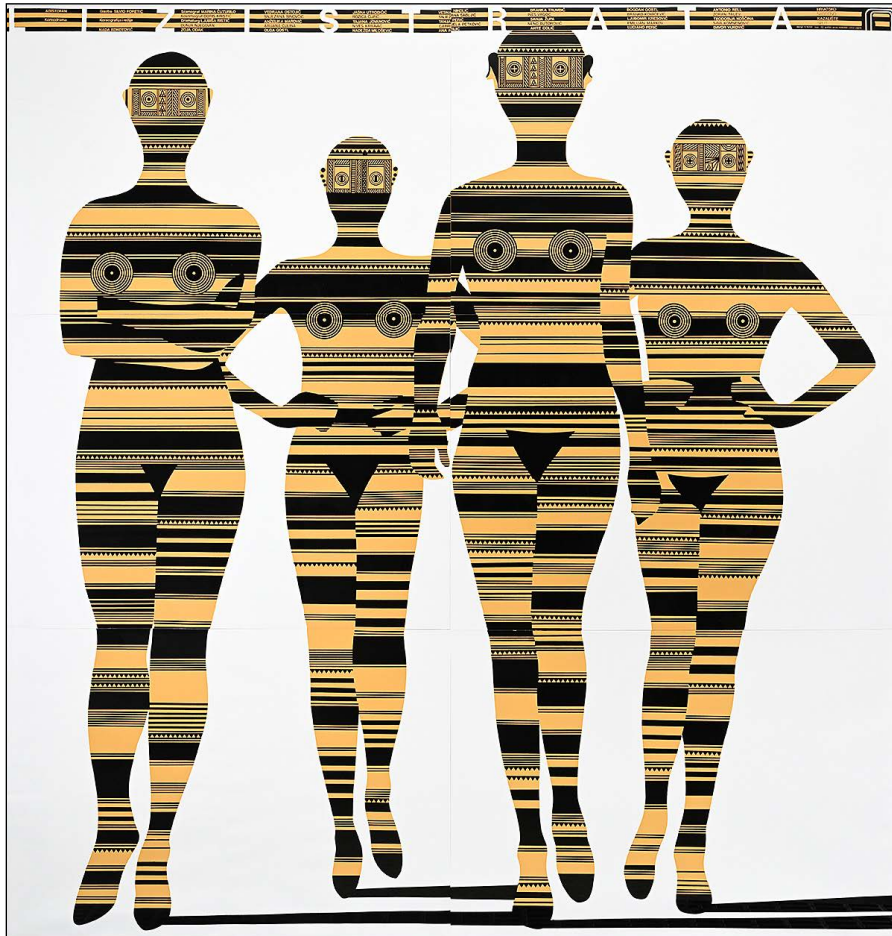
Boris Bućan was a Croatian artist and graphic designer of Ukrainian-Jewish heritage whose long career began during the late 1960s in Zagreb. Not committed to a single style, he continuously developed his artistic practice, often appearing to anticipate art movements that emerged outside what was then the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (in 1991, it broke up into six countries, including Croatia). Although he graduated from both the School of Applied Arts and the Academy of Fine Arts in Zagreb, his earliest work aligned him with the city's young avant-garde groups (in particular, The Interventionists), creating art that was made specifically for public, urban spaces rather than galleries. These immersive projects led to an interest in posters.

Bućan's first clients were primarily cultural organizations that gave him the freedom to push the medium beyond its conventional boundaries. He intentionally ignored the usual purpose of a poster—to communicate clearly—freely appropriating press imagery related to other events within his own designs. For example, in 1974, he incorporated an enlarged photograph of Frank Sinatra in a poster promoting a production of Brecht's *In the Jungle of Cities* (in which Sinatra definitely did not appear). On other occasions, he would poke holes through the paper of the poster or fail to include the most basic information about an event's location, each time placing himself as an artist between the viewer and the client while posing visual challenges and conundrums that had to be decoded.

This exhibition focuses on a small part of Bućan's expansive career, presenting the monumental posters he created for his first season with the Croatian National Theatre in Split, for which he produced designs between 1982 and 1986. While he had previously made a few large-format posters for other organizations and events, the images here—each composed of six separate sheets of paper—became his best-known designs, effectively transforming exterior walls into urban canvases for his artistic explorations. Each poster references a wide range of art-historical sources yet remains extremely modern; in many ways, Bućan's complex and occasionally contradictory forms flirt with the then-current philosophy of postmodernism that rejected the idea of objective truth in favor of relativism. Many of the posters from the first and second seasons of his tenure at the theater were displayed in their own exhibition in 1983, and, in 1984, they were chosen to represent the country at the 41st Venice Biennale. Such accolades helped expose Bućan's work to a global audience and established him as one of the most exciting and innovative poster designers of his day.

*This exhibition would not be possible without the generous support of Mirko Ilić.*





## Lysistrata, 1982

Boris Bučan (1947–2023)

*Poster House Permanent Collection*

- Aristophanes's *Lysistrata* is an ancient Greek comedy in which the titular female character convinces women from warring city-states during the Peloponnesian War to deny their spouses sex until they negotiate peace.
- In this arresting design, Bučan models the figures after those in Helmut Newton's photographic diptych *Sie Kommen, Paris (Dressed and Naked)* that had appeared in an issue of *French Vogue* the previous year. While the women are posed identically in each shot, in one they are shown nude and in the other fully clothed. They were seen at the time as powerful, Amazonian beauties—a very 1980s take on modern feminism.
- Bučan further plays with this concept of feminism by covering the figures with intricate striped patterns based on those of ancient Greek Dipylon vases in the late Geometric Style; these amphorae had been produced around the mid-eighth century B.C.E. and were often used as grave markers. He thereby desexualizes these boldly posed women, transforming their primary roles from objects of desire to forceful agents and harbingers of mortality.



## Shakespeare: The Taming of the Shrew, 1983

Boris Bućan (1947–2023)

*Poster House Permanent Collection*

- In all his posters for the Croatian National Theatre in Split, Bućan's imagery does not represent his interpretation of a specific scene within a performance but his response to the spirit of the production. This is perhaps most evident in this poster for William Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*, in which three riders in hunting pinks (traditional fox-hunting attire) gather in the foreground, accompanied by a trio of hounds.
- This six-sheet silkscreen incorporates a postmodernist range of bold patterns, similar to those found on Tunisian kilims (woven rugs) that inspired artists like Henri Matisse. Rather than relying on the rectilinear flatness of the designs, however, Bućan rotates them on multiple axes to create the illusion of three-dimensional space.
- Before 1918, Yugoslavia was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and its artists were often inspired by the decorative motifs of Art Nouveau and the Vienna Secession that circulated throughout the region. Bućan's eye-catching, decorative frame and complex patterning reflects this tradition, most likely inspired by the work of designers like Koloman Moser.
- Bućan often relegated text to the edges of a poster or abandoned it entirely, making the advertisement seem more like a painting within a frame of letterforms. Here, the title of the play as well as the names of the director and other constituents appear inside decorative circles in the style of old-fashioned typewriter keys, creating a border that echoes the patterns of dots within the composition.



## The Firebird/Petrushka, 1983

Boris Bučan (1947–2023)

*Poster House Permanent Collection*

- The most iconic image in Bučan’s oeuvre, this six-sheet poster advertises paired performances of two one-act ballets by Igor Stravinsky, *The Firebird* (1910) and *Petrushka* (1911). In the earlier fairytale, the mythical Firebird helps a prince defeat an evil sorcerer and free a group of princesses, while the later one chronicles the ill-fated love triangle among three puppets that have been brought to life by a magician.
- Bučan ignored earlier renderings of the Firebird, creating a hybrid creature with an avian head and neck on a female body, defined by pert breasts and shapely calves. She stands in a heroic pose in red stilettos as she strides with a raised fist toward an unseen enemy.
- Bučan frequently incorporated and modernized art-historical motifs and styles in his posters. Here, the figure’s pose and two-dimensional profile suggest those of gods in ancient Egyptian relief sculpture, while the large leaves in the background are similar to patterns designed by artists of the Vienna Secession. Further, the pattern on the Firebird’s body is reminiscent of the wedge-shaped indentations that characterize ancient Mesopotamian cuneiform writing.



## La Traviata, 1982

Boris Bućan (1947–2023)

*Private Collection of Dragi Savicevic, Zagreb, Croatia*

- Based on Alexandre Dumas’s 1852 play *La Dame aux camélias*, Giuseppe Verdi’s opera *La Traviata* chronicles the tragic downfall of a courtesan who sacrifices her own happiness and reputation for the man she loves. Here, Bućan shows a lone female figure in a recessed bar area, either examining her stockings or in a state of despair.
- This is one of a handful of designs that Bućan made almost entirely out of alternating gold-and-black bands to imply space and depth. The setting is based on the famous bar in Zagreb’s Kavarna Corso, a popular haunt for actors. Such visual insider jokes are common in Bućan’s posters.
- Bućan’s treatment of type in the design is especially daring; he relegates all the information about the production to the lower area of the composition in particularly tiny letters. This choice reinforces the sense that he understood posters primarily as works of art rather than as a means of visual communication.
- Metallic gold is an especially unstable ink, and often loses its luster over time. Here, the gold panels appear almost brown due to the oxidation of the copper-based pigment. Additionally, the six sheets that make up the poster were never lined or preserved, allowing the non-archival inks from each panel to transfer or “burn” into its neighbors. The upper-left panel in particular seems to have been stored next to one of Bućan’s other designs, with text promoting the theater visible in the formerly gold sections of the image.



## Voltaire: Candide, 1983

Boris Bučan (1947–2023)

*Private Collection of Dragi Savicevic, Zagreb, Croatia*

- Voltaire’s best-known play, *Candide*, is a satire chronicling the hardships and horrors encountered by the eponymous hero as he travels around the world, experiences that gradually erode his positive perception of human nature. In it, Voltaire ridiculed society’s most “sacred” institutions, among them the Church, the military, and the class system, decrying what he saw as the misguided optimism of much Enlightenment thought.
- The composition of this poster is directly taken from a little-known 1954 photograph of President Josip Broz Tito inspecting the border guards in Koper, a port city that had just been annexed by Yugoslavia under the Trieste Accord. By using Tito as a stand-in for Candide, Bučan subtly mocks the Communist dictator and his penchant for making grand visits to African countries.
- Bučan frequently referenced African motifs in both his fine art and poster designs, often incorporating masks inspired by those from various African and Oceanic cultures and historic periods. While he was influenced by the work of Pablo Picasso, who embraced similar imagery, Bučan typically also looked to original source material for these productions, most of which featured “exotic” locations or characters.
- In contrast to those in the photograph, the uniformed guards in this poster do not wear heavy coats but generic Western military dress. Instead of wearing busbies (ceremonial fur hats originally worn by European cavalry), Bučan has replaced their heads entirely with long feathers while their bayonets gradually transform into spears. Some interpret this design choice as Bučan implying that the pen is indeed mightier than the sword.



## Othello, 1983

Boris Bučan (1947–2023)

*Poster House Permanent Collection*

- In this six-sheet silkscreen design, Bučan builds on his poster from the same year for Verdi's opera *Nabucco* in which he created the form of a single lion from lines inspired by Mesopotamian cuneiform writing.
- Here, a pair of tigers—one light, the other dark—stand in for Desdemona and Othello in their ill-fated interracial marriage. The slightly wavy lines below the black tiger's face indicate that they are drinking from a body of water that reflects the surrounding tall grass.

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