

THE SEVENTH *PERMANENT* DISPLAY BY THE ETHNOGRAPHIC MUSEUM OF SPLIT, CROATIA

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The following paper was read at the 2004 “The Best in Heritage” international Conference, held annually in the city of Dubrovnik to celebrate the excellence of the most innovative, inspirational and awarded projects in the field of museums, heritage and conservation. The Conference is organized by the European Heritage Association, a non-governmental and non-profit organization based in Zagreb and dedicated to promoting every aspect of professional excellence in heritage professions.

The world’s only survey of the best museums, heritage and conservation projects is held under the patronage of ICOM, UNESCO, EUROPA NOSTRA, ICOMOS, City of Dubrovnik and Croatian Ministry of Culture.

The Ethnographic Museum of Split contributed to the proceedings of the 2004 Conference by presenting its award-winning project – the Museum’s seventh permanent display.

The Ethnographic Museum of Split, or rather the Museum staff, was awarded in the year of 2002 by the Croatian Museum Association. The award is presented annually to outstanding projects closely related to museum work. It is presented to individuals or teams of authors and not to institutions, for the reason that the Museum Association itself is not an institution, but an association of citizens.

The award carries the name of the Croatian writer, historian and lexicographer from the late 17th and early 18th centuries – Pavao Ritter Vitezovic. It included a certificate and a moderate amount of money (some EUR 1,000).

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The Ethnographic Museum of Split, the oldest museum of ethnography in Croatia, was founded in 1910. In the course of its history, seven *permanent* (i.e. long-term) exhibitions were mounted. The first two, those of 1910 and 1919, were organized in different school buildings, for the Museum was actually established within the Craft School by the school principal, civil engineer Kamilo Toncic, who had been collecting ethnographic material in his early life. He was also a longtime director of the Museum. The Museum collection in fact sprang up from the school collection of samples of folk handicrafts.

In 1924 the Museum moved into the former Town Hall – a building originating from the 14th century and reconstructed in neo-Gothic style in the 19th century. The same building still houses the Museum galleries. Its exterior is very attractive, but the interior is of questionable quality, i.e. interior conditions are not favorable for museum objects at all (because of humidity in the first place).

Since 1924, when the building was assigned to the Museum, the permanent display was changed a few more times (in 1934, 1946 and again in 1965). It was closed again in 1989 and from that time on the space was used only for some temporary exhibitions and as a working storage.

Despite the fact that the space of the former Town Hall proved to be quite inadequate for museum galleries, the seventh long-term exhibition has been mounted in order to meet the needs of the public, that is, to provide access to Museum's hidden treasures. It opened to the public in March 2001.

The collection outgrew this building long ago, so that storage rooms, offices, workshops and library have been located in neighboring buildings. Showrooms occupy some 400 square meters altogether. Owing to limitations of space, the exhibition focuses on the region of Dalmatia only, although the Museum's holdings include ethnographic artifacts (ca. 12,000 of them) from all parts of Croatia and some neighboring countries.

On the ground floor ancient weapons and chivalry games and dances are presented, as well as early-20th-century bedroom furnishings in a small separate gallery. Folk costumes, ornamental textile techniques and jewelry of the narrow coastal region of Dalmatia can be seen on the first floor, while folk costumes of inland Dalmatia, traditional handicrafts and farming implements are exhibited on the second floor. There is a reconstruction of traditional Dalmatian kitchen in the loft area, that is under the Museum roof, for in Dalmatian houses it used to be located there anyway.

Let me now illuminate the background of the decision to mount a new permanent display in spite of inadequacy and shortcomings of the building. Namely, in the year 2000 local authorities of Split, or certain influential individuals, made the uncompromising decision to reassign the building to a different purpose. At the same time, no guaranties were given to the Museum, other than empty promises, that a new adequate building would be provided within a reasonable time. With the pressure growing stronger, on Christmas 2000 the director of the Museum announced to the staff that the designing of a new permanent display would begin after the holidays. This was supposed to put an end to all discussions about the Museum leaving this building, with no new premises available.

This is precisely what happened. The display opened the door of the Museum to the public, making it impossible for anyone to work quietly on the removal of the Museum collection from the building.

Preparations for the mounting of the seventh permanent display started in the mid-January 2001 and the opening ceremony took place at the end of March of the same year. In other words, it took the Museum staff just two and a half months to complete all the work without any outside assistance. One should know that there are only 13 employees altogether, out of whom 5 are curators and 4 restorers (then there is a librarian, a photographer, an accountant and a receptionist). Mr. Silvio Braica, Ph.D., the Museum director and a curator at the same time, coordinated the whole project.

Besides museological concept, exhibition plan, object selection and restoration, the activities included also minor construction works in the interior, woodwork and painting, various repairs, such as fixing of electric wiring, and finally cleaning.

The Museum staff was assisted by neither an architect nor a designer. All the designer work was completed by the staff on their own, except for the graphic design of the Museum Guidebook, which was left to the professionals.

Owing to efforts and imagination of Museum restorers, a kind of scenery was produced and staged in order to recreate (within the building) real physical surroundings from which museum objects came. For this purpose a fishing boat and a small quay have been built of wood, plaster of Paris and Styrofoam, as well as the top of a

water-well, a fountain and several windows and doors typical of Dalmatian traditional architecture.

Linen and board screens for shading large Gothic windows were produced in the Museum workshop.

Reconstructions and replicas of a couple of folk costumes were done in the Museum workshop, too. The intention, namely, is to produce as many replicas of different costumes as possible, so as to preserve the originals better.

Unfortunately, the Museum could not afford adequate (or, better to say, any) showcases for displaying folk costumes, which predominate in the collection. Therefore, only glass pedestals were constructed from parts of Museum's ancient showcases for mounting dummies dressed in costumes. Several existing showcases were used for displaying smaller exhibits, particularly jewelry and weapons, to protect them at least from being stolen. In absence of suitable showcases, improvised ones were used for displaying some other exhibits.

Handmade labels, general and individual ones, are bilingual (in English besides Croatian) and descriptive to the degree that hopefully makes the exhibition comprehensible to a visitor.

The Museum Guidebook was published only a month after the permanent display had been opened, which is an achievement that deserves attention at least in Croatian museum circles (because a few museums in the country have existed for years without a proper or any guidebook). The Guide in English was printed a month after the Croatian version, so that everything was ready before July, just in time for the tourist season.

This permanent display project was not required to be authorized by the Museum Council or any other qualified body, for the reason that no specified funds from any institution or budget level had been allocated for the purpose. Neither the Croatian Ministry of Culture nor the County of Split - Dalmatia provided earmarked funds for this project. Only the local authorities participated in the expenses with the amount of 89,900.00 HRK (ca. EUR 12,000) and the rest was covered by general-purpose funds from the municipality and the county. By "general-purpose funds" I mean those that are assigned to the Museum on a monthly basis to cover the expenses of its everyday operation. Costs of the exhibition were considerably reduced by charge-free efforts of the staff and the help from those who cared about the Museum's existence.

The overall expenses of the permanent display, including the printing of the Guidebook, in the year 2001 amounted to 134,832.28 HRK (ca. EUR 18,000).

In the course of 2002 the Museum renovated its permanent display both technically and in terms of its content. Two rooms on the second floor, which had been used as storage facilities when the preparation of the display began, were then also turned into galleries and used to display the material that had been crowded. That year lighting was improved and the space air-conditioned. Also, fire alarm system and so-called panic-lights were installed, while video surveillance was upgraded, which all contributed to the quality of the exhibition and the security of both visitors and objects. Costs of these technical improvements were covered by the municipality.

The undertaking as a whole shows that, even under unfavorable circumstances (in the first place financial ones), a significant progress in museum operation can nevertheless be made. Only, realization of such a large museum project cannot happen at once, but it then takes place over an extended period of time, through gradual improvements.

The entire project is a result of a teamwork of the Museum staff, who approached the mounting of the display having high professional and aesthetic standards in mind. Available financial resources being very moderate, great efforts had to be made by the staff members to meet the criteria set in the early stage of work.

Since the project encountered a lack of understanding and belief on all levels of culture projects funding in the country, the Museum team was even more pleased with what was achieved.

At the same time, the Museum staff is absolutely aware that a lot more should have been done regarding the preservation of the displayed material, but we believe we did our best with the available financial resources. It could simply be either this way or no way. The award and the response from Museum visitors prove that we have chosen the right thing.

As you already know, the project received the national award "Pavao Ritter Vitezovic" by the Croatian Museum Association for the year 2002. It is hopefully quite reasonable to say that the award was well earned by the staff of the EMS, who has been striving for professional excellence under rather difficult conditions and in a situation when hardly anyone cares for the Museum's development. All the progress achieved in 2001, as well as in the preceding and

following years, is based on enthusiasm and persistent efforts of underpaid experts (which is the case in most museums in Croatia). On the other hand, talks about impressive museum premises, expensive exhibitions, museum managers and employment of specialized museologists have been considered “science fiction” topics by all museum professionals of Split, as all the museums financed from the town budget share more or less the same destiny. Nevertheless, the Museum is expected to move to larger and more appropriate premises in near future.

The described achievement would probably be nothing remarkable under normal circumstances. However, when work takes place in an atmosphere of unwillingness of the society and the authorities to take an active part in preservation of their own roots, every improvement can be considered a great success.

SEDMI STALNI POSTAV ETNOGRAFSKOG MUZEJA SPLIT

(Sažetak)

Ovaj je referat održan u rujnu 2004. god. na međunarodnoj manifestaciji “The Best in Heritage” (“Najbolji u baštini”), što se već treću godinu održava u Dubrovniku pod visokim pokroviteljstvom ICOM-a, ICOMOS-a, UNESCO-a, Europe Nostre, Grada Dubrovnika i Ministarstva kulture RH. Organizira ju Europska udruga za baštinu, neprofitna nevladina udruga sa sjedištem u Zagrebu.

Manifestacija okuplja najbolje, nagrađene projekte s područja muzejskoga rada, baštine i konzervacije iz cijeloga svijeta. Etnografski muzej Split predstavio je projekt stalnoga postava, koji je 2002. godine Hrvatsko muzejsko društvo nagradilo godišnjom nagradom “Pavao Ritter Vitezović”.