

“Collecting” the present in ethnographic museums

- The aim of this paper is to systematically explore and show the experience of experts in the European museums and the Ethnographic Museum in Zagreb in contemporary collecting. When collecting objects from contemporary daily life, museums must also include the theoretical aspects in their practice, especially in the field of urban ethnology/anthropology and contemporary museology, which will expand the knowledge about the multiple meanings of these items. Museum collections have to be consistently interpreted and reinterpreted in order to deepen the knowledge on the items that are kept.

Key words: everyday objects, contemporary collecting, ethnographic museum, virtual collection

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to systematically explore and show practical experience in contemporary collecting in European ethnographic museums, with an emphasis on a personal practical experience in the Ethnographic Museum. The development and implementation of new practices in the European ethnographic museums is a challenge for the museum profession, which is faced with a new kind of effort and finding new ways of presentation. This allows ethnographic museums to take an active role in society and to act as heritage institutions. It is well known that every museum is defined by its collection, and that contemporary museums cannot offer only the elements of the past to the public. Therefore, museums face issues as items are given new meanings. Ethnographic and historical museums are considered to be in the function of

keeping the memory of the community and society, and are seen as having a special responsibility because they have to decide what the current generations will remember and preserve for the future. That is why the museums are faced with the challenge of collecting objects of contemporary culture, and are facing numerous questions that had to be answered. What, in fact, should be recorded and presented to future generations? How should items in today's consumer society be recognized as having a special significance for our everyday culture? What method of choice should be applied? Are today's museums ready to create new knowledge?

THE HISTORY OF COLLECTING “CONTEMPORARY DOCUMENTS” OF EVERYDAY LIFE

In order to find answers to the numerous questions posed, museums in Sweden founded Samdok¹ in 1977 with the aim of investigating and recording daily life. The term is now used outside the Nordic countries as a term for “contemporary documentation” of everyday life, which includes the collection of items, written material, photographs and audio-visual records. Documentation refers to the collection and its interpretation through different types of records. Samdok uses ethnographic / anthropological methodology adopted by all the historical museums in Sweden in field research (Steen 1998: 152).

The idea about creating Samdok came from Nordiska Museet, in Stockholm, Sweden in 1973. The collections of Nordiska Museet displayed items from pre-industrial times, illustrating rural life from the late 18th and 19th centuries, while the period of the 20th century was not present or was very poorly represented. Likewise, in their collections there were no items that illustrated the life of the middle class peasantry and the lower class of citizens. That's why they deemed it necessary to carry out an evaluation of existing collections, which helped them make decisions about their development. They decided to stop collecting items that illustrate the early period of the rural culture, which were no longer actively used, and to start collecting items that illustrate the contemporary culture. “Contemporary collecting” has become since then a constant and planned museum activity, and the main motive of the museum became “collect today for tomorrow” (Steen 1998: 154).

1 The word Samdok is a coined word, from *sam* - modern, collaboration, connectivity, and *dok* - documentation.

At the very beginning of its activity, Samdok organized a *pool*. Samdok were thematically divided and served as a database of contemporary life. Gradually some museums began to participate in certain projects and to contribute data on the number of items that they purchased, so the requirement to develop its program, which would be virtually available to everyone, arose for each museum. The secretariat of Samdok is located in Nordiska Museet and is accessible to all members of the museum community. It functions actively by releasing the *Samdok Bulletin*, by organizing professional training sessions for museum staff and by counseling in order to expand knowledge on contemporary documentation. The network of museums Collectingnet, initiated by Samdok, is a system for continuous consultations and enrichment of knowledge on contemporary documentation. Their activities at the international level are particularly important: they launched the *Newsletter* that is published four times a year, and in 2007 they organized an international conference entitled *Collecting connecting*, which brought together a number of experts from various European countries. The basic idea was not only collecting, but also the analysis and interpretation of the collected material, and the establishment of data that will enable the “communication” of material to the visitors. A museum must constantly update the knowledge on the collected items in order to understand what an item means and symbolizes, and thus it is constantly participating in the creation of new knowledge. The network of museums Collectingnet initiated the foundation of a new Committee of ICOM, the COMCOL² (International Committee for Collecting) and the Committee on the “collection” of the present, which was established in 2010 in Shanghai. COMCOL is an international committee whose mission is to deepen the discussion and to drive the knowledge into practice, theory and ethics of collecting and the development of collections (material and immaterial). It is conceived as a place for exchanges of views and experiences of collection in a broad sense, which includes the collection of objects from the present, the return of cultural property and the practice that plays an important role in the collection of items both presently and in the future. The Committee has not limited itself to the ethnographic and historical museums, the field of its interest is also to extend the theory to all types of museums around the world.

2 <http://www.icom.museum/international/comcol.html>

CONTEMPORARY COLLECTING: THE PROBLEMS AND EXPERIENCES OF MUSEUM PROFESSIONALS

In most European museums the collection of items is very limited due to financial difficulties, but also a lack of understanding on the part of the government, which does not recognize it as one of the key activities of any museum. In addition, many museums are faced with the problem of crowded storages, where there is not enough room for new acquisitions. These problems have led museums to reflect on the manner and quality of collecting items in the future. When collecting items from our present, the key factor is professional collection because the museum has a new kind of responsibility not only towards its users, but also to the taxpayers. It is interesting that all ethnographic museums face these problems, but they have reached for the solutions in different ways. The experiences of Samdok spurred museum professionals for an international debate, but also towards the use of proven methodologies. One of the major developments in the professional collection of items was achieved when collecting became an integral part of field research. Two approaches had been applied: the first focused on items (kitchen furniture and clothes for children) which could, selected according to the type, material and model, represent a collection of the 20th century. This approach was mainly applied in the processes of purchase or receipt of donations for the museum and in the contemporary research of Swedish cultural and historical museums. The second approach was aimed at people. Which objects surround them and what do they mean to them? Each of these methods has an informative and documentary value, but the first is most commonly used in object-oriented cultural history, and the other in cultural anthropology. For the second approach, a museum expert plays a more significant role, namely he or she must provide a specific item for the collection because of its symbolic role, raising the quality of the collected items through this process of collecting. Collection of items during field research is extremely important because their meaning becomes larger and richer when paired with the source location, the identity of the owners, the method of usage, their symbolic role and the like. In addition, in context of field research a possibility exists of establishing contacts with numerous informants, *storytellers*, who will tell the story about the role of an object in their life. Besides the establishment of numerous contacts, the conversation allows collection of old photographs and taking new photos, or making a short film, or a record of the entire interview. When collecting items is an integral part of field research it allows us to place these items in a broad context. They have an interesting history that will be told

through a museum exhibition. The exhibits show not only the shape, color and material, but they also carry a particular meaning: the popular factory Fiat car “Fićo” became a symbol of the good life in the 1960s in Croatia. The curator plays the most important role in the collection of items from our daily life, directing the search towards the objects with symbolic meaning, as well as those which deserve to become part of the museum’s collections because of their social importance. The work on field research has resulted in a growth of the collection in the exemplary case of Nordiska Museet, for which about 70% of the collected items were donated to the museum³ (Bursell 1999: 160). One of the ways of contemporary “collecting” can be developed through work on the museum exhibitions. The museum exhibition will facilitate the collection of items because exhibits are needed for the museum to visualize the individual issues. Participation in the whole process, from research and collecting items to museum exhibitions and publications, shows the quality of the work performed.⁴

THE EXPERIENCES OF ETHNOLOGISTS FROM CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

The topics of “collection” of the present and collection in the future were discussed by ethnologists from the museums of Central and Southeastern Europe at the conference organized by the Museum für Volkskunde in 2002 in Vienna. Given the traditional methodology of collecting items, it became evident from the lectures of the museums’ curators and directors that the present is “collected” very little, or not at all. The conference had an important role because the museums discussed the importance of their collections and the need for their redefinition. Due to the fact that its holdings hold mainly material from Eastern and Southeastern Europe, the Austrian Museum für Volkskunde considered it necessary to contextualize existing objects, which would be made possible by cooperating with colleagues from various museums, in addition to working in field research. The collected items will be furnished with new stories and the contemporary context, and will increase the value of collections. Some museums from Eastern and South-Eastern Europe were not allowed, for political reasons, to collect items that were tied

3 For example, a modern kitchen and sets of kitchen equipment were donated, which encompassed about a thousand items.

4 More on the topic of contemporary collecting in: Antoš 2002, 2010d.

to religion, but this was exactly the reason why after 1990 they began to intensively collect precisely these kinds of items, as well as photographic documents and video documentation on popular piety and various practices related to the use of certain items (Beitl and Grieshofer 2003). Unfortunately, their area of research continues to be limited to the countryside and rural culture. A step further was made by the Austrian ethnologists and cultural anthropologists when they started *Alltagskulturen 1945 – 2000*, the project about everyday culture, which involved numerous Austrian museums. Their goal was to find important items that marked the changes in everyday culture from 1945 to 2000, and which significantly influenced it. That is why they singled out innovative items that were used in the contexts of work, housing and transportation as well as in everyday life and leisure. For example, leisure time between 1945 and 1960 in Austria was marked by the portable radio and cinema, between 1960 and 1970 it was marked by the Barbie doll, for 1970-1980 it was the Fisher C4skis, for 1980-1990 the Wiener videotapes, for 1990-2000 the mountain bike. Interestingly, they collected stories and photos about the use of particular items, as well as complete documentation which they presented with the items in the touring exhibition in the Austrian museums in 2005. In addition, their research has encouraged many students and doctoral students towards more detailed scientific research (Bockhorn, Schindler, Stadelmann 2005).

ACTIVE PARTICIPATION OF CITIZENS IN CONTEMPORARY COLLECTING

In recent years, access to the collection of objects in many museums began to change because the museums focused on the needs of their users and therefore the focus of their activity switched from collecting items to visitors. This has led them to focus their attention on the audience when collecting cultural heritage, and to involve citizens in documenting their history and culture. Such an approach has been applied in the project *Entrepreneurial Cultures in European cities* (2008-2010), which was funded by the European Union (ECEC)⁵, which concerned the interdisciplinary collection of items. The pro-

5 The project *Entrepreneurial Cultures in European cities*, financed by the EU funds from the program *Culture* (2008- 2010), which focused on research on small and medium enterprises in seven European cities (Amsterdam, Berlin, Volos, Barcelona, Liverpool, Luxembourg and Zagreb). The project primarily encompassed economic, social and cultural strategies of entrepreneurs, many of whom have immigrant backgrounds. The aim of the project was to show how innovation and creativity were associated with new entrepreneurial initiatives in terms of promoting inter-

ject resulted in a number of local projects in which the curators, museum educators and volunteers worked with entrepreneurs and actively participated in the collection of tangible and intangible cultural heritage. The basic idea was to collect items that were characteristic of a particular job and which individuals identified with. It was particularly important to make contact with entrepreneurs who would thus recognize the museum as a place that preserves their history and as a place of intercultural dialogue. The search for typical items that would present contemporary businesses and that would also show today's everyday culture was a new challenge for museums. For example, the Museum of European Cultures in Berlin collected items relating to the work related to the production and distribution of "döner kebab" (Fig. 1/p. 330), which symbolized the contemporary global culture of fast food - *fast food culture*, which Turkish entrepreneurs who immigrated to Berlin brought in and developed its sales. These items, placed in the museum collection, will not only symbolize a type of culture of fast food, but will also represent a certain cultural community in Berlin (the Turks).

A step further in the *outreach* programs⁶ was made by the National Museum of Liverpool, whose staff conducted research in a *cafe* in the part of Liverpool where entrepreneurs had their stores, and they, along with using aggressive marketing, called for their cooperation – they called on them to contribute to their community and to tell their stories (Fig. 2/p. 330). Their stories and photos (old and new) were exhibited in a local *cafe* in which curators

disciplinary collection of tangible and intangible heritage of today's entrepreneurs. Partners in the project were the Amsterdam Historical Museum (AHM); The Museum of European Cultures (MEC), Berlin; Ethnographic Museum (EMZ), Zagreb; Municipal Center for Historical Research and Documentation (AHM), Volos; Institut de Formation Sociale (IFS), Luxembourg; Barcelona History Museum (MUHBA), Barcelona, and National Museums Liverpool (NML), Liverpool, while the associated partners were Imagine Identity and Culture (Imagine IC), Amsterdam; Neighborhood Museum, Berlin; Centre de Documentation sur les Migrations Humaines (CDMH), Dudenlange (L) and Tallinn City Museum, Tallinn.

6 Because of the significant and rapid demographic changes, particularly in Western European countries, museums have started working on different strategies that were specifically related to the establishment of intercultural dialogue, in order to attract a new kind of audience. One of the methods is the external and participatory program (outreach work), which is applied in the work with the target groups that normally do not visit the museum. During the implementation of outreach the interest of potential visitors for the contents of the museum is aroused and they are encouraged to collaborate with the museum. By working with these groups in the museum and outside it, museum professionals can involve citizens in various museum activities pertaining to working with collections and on exhibitions.

conducted interviews. In addition, they invited them to collaborate through *Facebook*, on which they collected more than a hundred of stories and a few thousand photos. In this way they promoted their museum, which is under construction and called on all citizens to be their users.

Another example is the Amsterdam museum, which has established cooperation with 60 volunteers from the south-east part of Amsterdam. Volunteers conducted interviews with entrepreneurs and their customers (Fig. 3/p. 331) and published photos from interviews on the website of the museum. The *Outreach* project was completely successful because its website is enriched with new stories daily. In total it has accumulated 250 stories and 60 video clips. The collected material engenders a special documentary value because, due to the nature of the Internet as a medium which is accessible to an extremely wide range of users, the museum project got a brand new dimension – it is no longer just a museum project, but also a community project. Of course, the restrictions in such a project are the language barriers, making this material is available only to the Dutch-speaking world. It was also necessary to find new ways of presenting the collected material in a museum exhibition and to use aggressive marketing to further attract the audience. By audience we do not mean only children, who are regular visitors to the museum, we also mean entrepreneurs and the middle generation of users, who, because of working hours and a different style of life, do not have the time to visit museums.

The ethnographic museums in Central, Eastern and Southeastern Europe were mainly focused on the collection of material and research of rural culture, but in recent years the area of their research has shifted towards urban culture. This was the reason for the inclusion of the Ethnographic Museum in Zagreb in the project, during which we have, in addition to the items related to the consumption of coffee, obtained filmed material related to the culture of our daily routine. These objects have symbolic meaning for businesses and many people who consume coffee.⁷

COLLECTING ITEMS FOR THE EXHIBITION *LET'S HAVE A COFFEE!*

While working on the preparation of the exhibition *Let's Have a Coffee!*, we collected items for the collection of household inventory relating to the eve-

⁷ More on the topic of active participation of the citizens in the contemporary collecting, regarding *Entrepreneurial Cultures in European cities* projects in: Antoš 2010a; 2010e; 2011; 2012a; 2012b; 2013.

ryday culture of drinking coffee in *cafes*. Many of these items, such as mugs, are very important to individual persons because at home they drink coffee from just such a cup, because it is their favorite cup. Thus, some items possess an emotional meaning. This is why we have already collected a few cups from the 1970s for the Collection. The exhibition presented the first coffee factory in Croatia - "Franck", which, in addition to coffee, sold coffee cups inscribed with the name of the company to businesses. "Franck" donated cups dating from the 1960s to this date to the exhibition of the Ethnographic Museum, which have been included into the Collection of household inventory of the Ethnographic Museum. Given that "Franck" cups can be seen on the terraces of the *cafes* in Zagreb and that they are related to the businesses in Zagreb, we filmed a film *Let's Have a Coffee!*, in which we presented the daily culture of coffee consumption. In this way we contextualized the exhibited items from everyday life and gave them a new meaning by enriching them with information about the people who used them and the meaning they had for them. In addition, we obtained information about the manufacturer of the cups, Inker, which began producing coffee cups for the "Franck" factory in the 1960s. The cups that were collected for the museum collection relate mostly the design and the taste a certain time, but also the habits of people in the 1960s, when only small cups were used for black coffee. In fact, only in the last twenty years have medium and large cups begun to be used, depending on the type of coffee consumed. Newly acquired items have also been presented virtually, namely on the website of the project *Entrepreneurial Cultures in European cities*, together with objects from other museums that have participated in the project (Fig. 4/p. 331). Interdisciplinary approach in collecting items allows the creation of new meanings and new interpretations of museum items, this time in virtual form.

Contextualizing the items is seen today as one of the important sources of knowledge in contemporary collecting and redefining existing collections. Cups from coffee shops and items that were related to the entrepreneurs, were contextualized with items from the historical collections that were related to the rituals of coffee consumption in different cultures. Thus the ceremony of making coffee in Ethiopia was illustrated by the coffee service machine from the 19th century from the Collection of world cultures, and the interior of a Turkish café was reconstructed with the help of items from Turkey and Bosnia from the 19th and early 20th century, from the Collection of world cultures and the Collection of household inventory, while drinking coffee in a harem in Bosnia was illustrated with items from the 19th century from the Collection

of household inventory. Such an approach to the treatment of the subject allowed us to connect museum collections and the interpretation of items.

Generally, the recent research of culture is a characteristic area which is not a static phenomenon, and which is trying to be perceived as a dynamic process. The scientific classification into cultural areas and geographical areas became the subject of many scientific analyses because this way of doing things brings us back into the position of “frozen culture” and uniformed criteria which are insufficient for a deeper analysis of the item at hand. The main goal is to gather enough information about an item to describe the cultural, political and social ties that will offer the audience a possibility of independent research.⁸

INTERDISCIPLINARY VIRTUAL CONTEMPORARY COLLECTING

The practice of contemporary “collecting” has shown us that the future strategy of collecting items should aim to connect different disciplines and items with users. Special websites allow access to the collections of photos to a wide range of visitors, for example, *Flickr*, on which users have a possibility to add their descriptions and comments. One of the goals of the project *Entrepreneurial Cultures in European cities* was to create a single virtual collection by collecting tangible and intangible heritage of the new European entrepreneurs on its website. This collection of objects adds the ability to add stories and items for museum collections. Photos of the items collected during research and work on local projects were placed on the project ECEC website and linked to *Flickr*. The displayed museum items, presented together with objects from other museums that have participated in the project, have become public cultural heritage. It is interesting that some museums, when cooperating with the community, use the Internet portals as places where they have achieved cooperation with the community in the purchase of new items for the museum collection. For example, the Museum of Liverpool used *Facebook* for the local project *The Secret Life of Smithdown Road* as an innovative place for the establishment of cooperation with the local community. On the *Flickr* website *Facebook* members were able to place contemporary street photographs of shops and their owners. This allowed the museum to develop a small collection of bestselling items which they used to present the achievements of a business, along with photos and video documentation. An interac-

8 For more details regarding the exhibition *Let's have a coffee!* see: Antoš 2010b, 2010c

tive site on the Internet was also used by the Amsterdam museum as a portal where entrepreneurs, their customers and all interested parties could set up their own stories, videos, photos and objects relating to trade in their neighborhood (Fig. 5/p. 331). Selected samples from the collected material were used for an exhibition which was set up in 2011 in the Amsterdam museum, and some of them have become an integral part of the museum's collection. Virtual collections of objects are an interesting medium for museums owing to the multiple possibilities of gathering information on each topic. A virtual collection of material offers the possibility of experimenting with different ways of collecting objects, virtual as well as real. Unlike virtual collections, which open the possibility of participating in the creation of the content of a collection to all users, in the physical museum collection the final decision and selection of the items still is entrusted to the curators. In the case of the virtual collections of objects, of course, there are many doubts related to their durability, the authenticity of data describing an individual item or photo, or the shaping of this virtual collection in the future.

Museum experts discussed the possibility of collecting items from our everyday lives only in a virtual form. This theoretical possibility is supported by scientists who are engaged in information technology because digital recording manages to record the shape and the presence of items, which makes them seem real. Therefore, they believe that it is not necessary to keep an item in the museum collection. Generations to come will decide whether to keep items from our everyday life in the digital form, and in the process they certainly must keep in mind that they are dealing with a selective process of collecting data on actual items and their presence in a digital form. During digitalization specific problems may occur related to the way of recording the items, because only one recording cannot capture all the details of interest for an individual item. It is always important whether this digital photo will be displayed for the purpose of training of the users, or as part of scientific research. For example, if you record the entire mini skirt, whose appearance marked the 1960s, the recording will be useful for educational purposes and for presentation at an exhibition, but it will be completely useless to scientists involved in the research of textiles from the 1960s because no details will be left recorded that will show the cut, fabric, details of the design and similar characteristics. Digitalization does offer us new opportunities to collect material in new forms.

One of the important media for contemporary "collecting" is the image, which

is the one most commonly used in museums. Many museums are focused on collecting old and new photographic material, as well as that which helps us in the study of contemporary life. In this case it is necessary to consolidate photos with interviews in order to carry out a deeper analysis of the collected material. Another important issue concerning the collection of photographic material as part of our everyday culture is how to collect photos taken with a mobile phone and sent in by e-mail or text message/MMS, which have become one of the important features of contemporary life. This question is particularly important in a globalized world, where most people maintain contact with their friends and family through a variety of media.

Technology opens up opportunities for sophisticated interpretation, which becomes a counterweight to items in terms of collecting and storing knowledge for the future. Storing the results of research in the DVD-ROM *Digital education kit - Entrepreneurial Cultures in European cities*⁹ (Antoš 2010e) is such an example, which has the ability, as an interactive publication, to hold photos and film and text material about activities of the local project. In addition, the user is provided with a very simple overview of the entire project and of the way of its realization. Data on all the institutions that participated in the project are linked on it, and thus the user is allowed to independently select and compare content.

CONCLUSION

Using new technologies, cultural institutions reinforce the knowledge that is based on interpretation and contextualization. A virtual visitor may understand better, and be better prepared for the interpretation of, what he or she has seen than in the case of being in contact with the original items. Therefore, museum professionals have a major role in the selection of items and information that will be shown to virtual visitors. When collecting items from daily life, museums must include theoretical aspects in their practice, especially in the field of urban ethnology/anthropology and contemporary museology, which will expand the knowledge about the multiple meanings of these

⁹ Since almost every partner in the project presented their research results through a museum exhibition and since all had accumulated considerable photographic and video material, the idea of releasing a DVD imposed itself on everyone – and thus the *Digital educational kit - DEC - Entrepreneurial Cultures in Europe* came into being, which I myself edited. Our project gradually progressed during two years of work, which we journaled on the project website www.eciec.eu, which was edited by Monika Smidt.

items. The meaning of an item from the global culture changes in relation to a scientific point of view, as well as to their social environment, but also to the particular context. It is necessary, in addition to material objects, to collect and preserve evidence of intangible heritage. This information is extremely valuable today, and will be especially important for future researchers to be able to study our daily lives. Collections must be constantly interpreted and reinterpreted in order to deepen the knowledge about the items that are kept in museums. Museums and science have always been closely linked, because collected items can help us understand who we are, where we came from and what our past was. Interdisciplinary approach which combines ethnology with other social sciences is being introduced in the museums. The new reformed museum becomes participatory, collaborating in the process with the public in various aspects, and even in the cases when new meaning is sought for the collections and items that will be provided by the community in which the museum operates.

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