

“Our Most Precious Cultural Institution – The Ethnographic Museum”¹

- The foundation of the Ethnographic Museum was an interesting and a long-lasting process and its complexity is shown in the diversity and the richness of its holdings. Irrespective of the fact that in 2019 the Museum is marking its 100th anniversary of independent activity at the current location in Mažuranić Square, its origins at the National Museum, founded in Zagreb in 1846 against the backdrop of the Illyrian Revival movement activities and the awakening of national consciousness. At the time, many other national museums were founded in the neighbouring countries prompted by a similar patriotic elation and the Croatian National Museum emanated the same need in Croatia to confirm its heritage and identity through a museum institution. Through development of museum activity and specialisation of fields of interest, individual departments and collections of the National Museum separated into independent museums. Consequently, the Ethnographic Museum was founded following the order of the Viceroy of Croatia and Slavonia issued on the 22nd October 1919, as a part of the National Museum. It included several collections of different provenance. Those were ethnographic collections of the Historical and Archaeological Department of the Croatian National Museum, the Museum of Arts and Crafts, The Croatian School Museum, The Museum of the Chamber of Trade and Crafts and the collection of products of home-based folk craft businesses referred to as “S. Berger’s Collection”. In fact, in April 1919 the government purchased the latter collection from the industrialist Salamon Berger, who became the first Director of the newly founded museum, although he was not a museum professional. Ethnography profession developed simultaneously with the development of the Museum. Hence, in 1924 the Ethnographic Museum employed the first professional, the ethnographer and one of the founders of University Study Programme of Ethnography at the University of Zagreb, Milovan Gavazzi.

¹ Esih I. 1934. “Our most precious cultural institution - the Ethnographic Museum”. *Morning paper*, no 7963, according to Vujić 2014: 16.

Throughout the century, distinguished experts enriched the work of the Museum with their research, as well as through collection of material publication of professional and scientific papers. Traces of their work are preserved in ample museum documentation and the specialized library, which provides insight both into museum publications and into the professional publications, printed both at the national and international level. The fact that the Ethnographic Museum was one of the cornerstones of the museum profession as early as in the first half of the 20th century was confirmed by an article in *Jutarnji list* entitled “Our Most Precious Cultural Institution – the Ethnographic Museum” (Vujić ed. 2014). The article was published in 1934 and it proudly highlighted the fact that the Museum had 26,000 visitors, which was a very high number compared with other Zagreb-based museums at that time (Ibid.). Nevertheless, times change and so do the interests of the public and hence the current comparisons concerning museum attendance are not in support of the Museum. The latest renovation was performed during the period from 1968 to 1972 and the scars of time are visible in every corner of the Museum.

Throughout its history, the Ethnographic Museum has changed its permanent exhibition several times, keeping abreast of the European trends in the conception of the exposition, which was also the topic addressed in several exhibitions staged in 2019 on the occasion of the anniversary. Nevertheless, the concept of the exhibition dating back to 1968 certainly cannot meet the needs of contemporary customers. Consequently, 2015 saw the launch of the renovation project of the Ethnographic Museum entitled “Renewed heritage for smart and sustainable development in a hyper-connected world”. Due to the high value of investment and the complexity of the intervention, the comprehensive investment was divided into several stages. The first stage included solving the problem of museum storage space, which was achieved in the second half of 2015 with the assistance of the City of Zagreb, which provided the Museum with the possibility to use the building of the former alehouse named *Zemaljska pivnica* (National Ale House) in Kačićeva Street. In 2016, conservation and restoration documentation was prepared for a renovation of the façade and the roof of the main building of the Ethnographic Museum performed by the Croatian Conservation Institute, since this is a unique cultural monument, an example of the Secession architecture of the highest monumental value. In fact, in 1904, the building was designed by Vjekoslav Bastl for the Commerce and Crafts Museum. He was Otto Wagner’s disciple. The specific objective of façade renovation was to give back the former glow both to the building without ornaments and to the fascinating dome perched on the roof of the Museum. The works started in 2017 and ended in the jubilee year 2019, which is the most beautiful present to the Museum for its 100th anniversary. The Museum was simultaneously working on the project of comprehensive renovation, concerning which it applied for structural funds for financing from Operational Programme Competitiveness and Cohesion in partnership with the Croatian Chamber of Economy. After a positive evaluation, it obtained funds for the preparation of project documentation comprising of conceptual design, basic and detailed design for the main building of the Museum, for the atrium through which it is connected with the future exposition about the Croatian economy in the Croatian Chamber of Economy and for the future museum storage building located in

Kačićeva Street. Comprehensive project documentation was completed in 2018 and 80% of the costs were co-financed from EU funding. Based on the prepared documentation, in the second half of 2018, the Museum applied for the first available tender for the renovation of the museum storage building in Kačićeva Street, that is for the invitation for revitalisation of brownfield sites through Integrated Territorial Investment (ITI) under Zagreb Urban Agglomeration Development Strategy. The estimated value of investment reached HRK 41 million. The project successfully completed the second stage of evaluation and the results are expected in the second half of 2019. Concerning the constructive remediation of the main building in Mažuranić Square, as well as the renovation of the atrium and the new exhibition, we are expecting the invitation for co-financing from EU funding in 2020. In other words, that will happen only during the next financial period of the European Commission, since in the 2014 – 2020 programming period Croatia has used up all the planned resources for the renovation of cultural heritage. Against the backdrop of the scale of investment and the complexity of the intervention, assistance from several sources will be required. Hence, in addition to EU funding, we are expecting assistance of the founder, the City of Zagreb, and the Ministry of Culture, since we are talking about the national museum *par excellence* whose valuable holdings, systematically arranged in 45 museum collections, provide the essence of the national culture.

Even in aggravated conditions the Museum implements programmes and activities and it has been publicly recognised by its excellent cultural exhibitions through which curators are making it possible for extremely valuable exhibits, processed and presented in accordance with the highest professional standards, to see the light of day. Exhibitions organised by the Ethnographic Museum are in demand throughout the world. Hence, every year it implements several valuable both European and intercontinental exchange projects. Consequently, 2019 will see the continuation of travelling exhibition of the “Croatian Intangible Cultural Heritage” included in the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage Lists in Lithuania, Australia, China and Canada, while the exhibition entitled “Of Animals and Humans” is the central this year’s exhibition in the Museum of Nova Gorica. Exhibition programmes, organised to mark the 100th anniversary to be held in the Museum itself, are intended for different target groups. Hence, the exhibition of “100 kindergartens for 100 museum years” has highlighted the educational component of museum work and activities in establishing connections with educational institutions, while the exhibition entitled “The Treasure of Ethnographic Museum - 100 exhibits for 100 years” – was devised by the curators of the Ethnographic Museum, striving to present the collections to the audience through their distinctive selection in an interesting and entertaining manner. Each museum item has entered the museum for a reason – for the fact that it is rare, representative, connected with someone famous or because of some other story behind it that communicates its value and distinctiveness.

Anniversaries always provide opportunities to reflect on previous work, but such an anniversary in the 21st century is also the right moment for attentive reflection about the way the museum operates, the values that guide it and the type of trends it creates for the future as a national institution. Collection policies in the best manner reveal the values promoted by the Ethnographic Museum, in the context of a different climate

of heritage interpretation that has been increasingly focusing on the content different from academic practices of the 20th century. The types of challenges that the curators are currently facing and the way they tackle them are crucial issues that will determine the future of the profession. Contemporary museum practices point out engaged and participatory museums, open to studying relevant topics important for the society that we live in. Nevertheless, how to select topics and address them in a responsible manner? There are many traps, ranging from irresponsible activism and pandering to the audience to excessive concessions or professional requirements, neglecting both the public and the customers. Challenges are globally present, according to quite recent controversial exhibitions about the homeless who have become exhibits² or newly built museums that idealise the nation or the state.³ “Museums are dangerous places because they control the storytelling”, stated Moana Jackson from Te Papa Museum in Wellington.⁴ Well, is the Ethnographic Museum a dangerous place? Does it intend to become one? To what extent have the curators made a challenging breakthrough with exhibitions into relevant topics that the current society is interested in, which help it to find answers to important questions? Their achievements can be assessed only by the public. It is a continuous professional challenge for Museum experts, who are generators of research and authors of museum exhibitions. Their enthusiasm is a prerequisite for a step out of the comfort zone of established practices and work habits, which are “the killers” of creative solutions. Innovative achievements require diverse professional focus, which is created through lifelong learning, a change in approach, teamwork and acceptance of changes in the surroundings. That can inspire the realisation of new projects of the Museum and yield good results among the members of the public, in other words encourage social responsibility in the creation of the future that we would all like to have.

It is not an easy road and an extremely bureaucratized environment are aggravating circumstances in which increasing red tape mercilessly uses the resources, irrespective of the fact that they are continuously diminishing. Museum professionals throughout the world are persistently striving to raise the awareness of the important social and cultural benefits provided by museums, which need to provide the key for assessment of their work. Education is imperative, both of the public and the customers, directing them towards becoming better and more responsible citizens and making a positive impact on all the segments of human activity. So why aren't these attitudes being more loudly expressed? The priorities are not organised only by the external pressure. Distancing of some museums from the public may also contribute to that. Rigid attitudes and a lack of understanding of the legacy collected by the others, Anglo-Saxon colleagues would refer to it as “curatorial and conservator's freak out” or, to put it

2 For example, a homeless Roma couple exhibited in Malmö Konsthall in Sweden. <http://www.takepart.com/article/2015/03/05/museum-turns-homeless-people-into-art-installation> (visited on 11th November 2018).

3 Controversies concerning this issue are successfully portrayed by the Skopje-based Museum of the Macedonian Struggle for Statehood and Independence. Especially if it is additionally observed in the overall planning of the city centre with which the name of Alexander the Great is linked.

4 This is especially linked with interpretation of colonial history <https://thespinoff.co.nz/atea/23-10-2018/museums-are-dangerous-places-challenging-history/> (visited on 11th November 2018).

more mildly, an inappropriate emotional relationship towards one's own collection in which every stronger approach of the public through interaction is considered as a threat for museum materials. There really is room for self-criticism at this point, as was pointed out by an Icelandic museum professional at the ICOM ICR Conference in Reykjavik in 2011, emphasising that the greatest danger for museum materials is posed by irresponsible curators and conservators, rather than the visitors. The latter can be clearly supported by numbers showing destroyed items which have never seen the light of day in museum display cases, nor have they ever been seen by the visitors. The fragility of ethnographic collections, sensitivity of interpretation of intangible heritage places special responsibility upon curators of the Ethnographic Museum who have been preserving for a hundred years what is currently non-existent in real environment, something that was until recently considered as everyday life, strongly present and yet after several decades swept away by turbulent times.

It is actually not easy to decide whose story to tell at exhibitions and at permanent exhibitions. The Museum does not only address topics explored by the profession – it also tells us about ourselves. The public is already able to tell the difference between a *pro forma* approach and a real involvement. Work at the museum shows us commitment, love for the heritage, for people, it talks about values that we nurture and promote, not only during the working hours but also as curators of time and space who connect the past and the present with the future. In the 21st century, it is certainly important to consider new forms of professional work. How to “revive” museum collections that we are already preserving and how to collect new items and stories. The challenges in interpretation are immense, yet there is the possibility of choice and interesting solutions, of these technologies that help to put the content into context in the new heritage framework. The selection reveals the values promoted by the museum. The creation of a narrative that has both a historical and a cultural significance and is able to mobilise the community and convey positive messages is a complex task. Are these messages complete or fragmented in small separate micro-universes? Museum items arrive to our museums taken out from the real environment that does not exist anymore and a considerable amount of skill is required to redesign them to form relevant content. Artistry is required for selection of a good story, as well as to create a complex narrative about one's country through time, transfer the feelings of different communities, build a narrative for the today's urban citizen and question how they perceive the connection with traditional cultures, with their past. It is primarily through this manoeuvre that cultural action is formed. If everything that has been preserved in our museum is considered, we need to ask ourselves about what we have “put away” as national legacy and as something worth preserving. Do we see our reflection in these objects nowadays? Do we recognise our identity in them?

The concept of culture is currently questioned at multiple levels, from possessive phrases about having or not having culture to definitions such as the one in which “culture is a nebulous structure of feelings that define the life of a people and a set of productions (art, etc.) that reflect upon, speak to or mold that structure of feeling through various strategies of representation” (Mitchell 2000). That certainly is an extraordinary perception of culture, which is not a matter of possession of someone but of acting through a

person. This is a rather delicate issue for museum professionals because the Museum collects items from someone else's life and transforms them into heritage, something worth preserving, something that becomes national treasure. That transformation happens in the museum, which becomes a living venue of interpretation. From that aspect, stories are equally important as objects because they are actually a part of a larger whole. They are units that we consider through the overall museum holdings; through collections that they comprise of, which mutually complement the mosaic of tangible and intangible heritage. Well, what are we storing at the Ethnographic Museum? Even if we provided a more comprehensive description, we would leave out something important if we tried to provide a more detailed presentation of what makes up for some forty collections that belong to the Museum. The profession itself needs to find the right answers, which are certainly not unequivocal, and check whether the Museum is more inclined towards the approach in which tangible substance prevails, rather than the logic of culture.

A bold breakthrough requires brave individual involvement of museum experts who will make probing of key development principles and steer the museum operation like a ship towards new horizons. Programme development is perceived as navigation by individual authors involved in management in culture (Dragojević and Dragičević Šešić 2008). Nevertheless, instead of a charismatic leader who “navigates” like a captain in the current context of participatory action in culture, proactive crew is also expected. Irrespective of the fact that it is more convenient to consider the evolution of change through management apparatus and the role of the director, this is a concept that has been overcome in museum practices. It certainly presents less of a challenge for any aware museum professional, who is aware of the danger that the profession may simply move on in search of more active protagonists. We would certainly like to see the latter among the younger generations of curators, as activators of future changes, those who will cause a stir at the museum premises through new energy and enable the passage to a new dimension of heritage interpretation. How to cultivate these changes at the Museum depends on the amount of courage shown by the experts to become involved in a venture in which they will make the museum vision come true in the future through a mission. It is important to highlight the ability of the profession to focus on what matters, on the positive, on the customers. The Ethnographic Museum has a huge advantage in terms of pushing the boundaries of interpretation because it can exploit the anthropological magic of its collections in the new reflection about what makes up human experience and how to shed light on it through interaction with museum objects. The message that we are striving to convey is that we are aiming to establish a museum intended to provide a venue in which people will meet. We have been perseveringly working on building renovation and on the new exhibition. Nevertheless, nicely arranged premises mean nothing without emotions and commitment to breathe in new life into both the objects and the premises. The Ethnographic Museum has shown this determination and a wish to work. What it needs at this point is both the perseverance and commitment of the entire team, as well as a little luck and a huge amount of support.

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