

*Toys – Childhood Forever.*  
Zagreb, The Ethnographic Museum,  
8<sup>th</sup> June 2021 – 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2022

The success of the *World of Toys* project, held at the Ethnographic Museum in 2012 and 2013, and the guest exhibition *Hrvaške otroške igrače med tradicijo in sodobnostjo* (*Croatian Children's Toys Between Tradition and Modernity*), held at the Slovenian Ethnographic Museum in Ljubljana in 2020, proved that there is still significant public interest for the topic of children's toys and games, as well as other related themes encompassed by the anthropological notion of cultural childhood. Despite the considerably challenging task of, figuratively speaking, keeping the museum's doors open under the circumstances of a global epidemic and in the midst of post-earthquake renovations, Iris Biškupić Bašić, Ph.D., the Senior Curator of the Ethnographic Museum, developed the exhibition project *Toys – Childhood Forever*, while designer Nikolina Jelavić Mitrović designed and adapted the content for the youngest visitors.

The eponymous central exhibition created by Iris Biškupić Bašić, placed in the north hall on the ground floor, presented toys from the Ethnographic Museum holdings, indirectly also providing an outline of collecting policies throughout the museum's past. Until the mid-1990s, toys that entered the museum's collections were mostly of traditional provenance, whether they were items made for children by members of their households or by children themselves, as well as traditional craftsmanship products intended for children. As collection methodologies and museum collecting concepts started to change, this prompted a more intensive process of collection of toys and games of industrial production from the interwar period, followed by the socialist period, as well as the period from Croatia's independence to the present day. Upon entering the exhibition hall, visitors were greeted by a *hopscotch*, followed by a cross-section of the toys from the museum's holdings ranging from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the present day, as a form of introduction to the two large exhibition sections. In the first section, the emphasis was on children's toys that are products of traditional craftsmanship. One portion presented the toys from today defunct and almost forgotten craftsmanship centres, such as the villages of Vidovec and Zelova in the Dalmatian Hinterland, while the other portion focused on the living heritage in the form of ceramic toy production in northern Croatia, and children's wooden toys from a series of villages in Hrvatsko Zagorje – a traditional phenomenon included in UNESCO's Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. In the context of the latter, a special section comprised enlargements of toy replicas with traditional motifs borrowed from



Picture 1. Exhibition display *Childhood in Ancient Times*, Photo by Nina Koydl

the master workshop of Ivica Mesar from Tugonica, which were part of a hands-on exhibit seasonally exhibited in Marija Bistrica. The second section was dedicated to the toys and games manufactured from 1950s to 1990s in Croatian factories such as Biserka in Zagreb, Jugoplastika in Split, Tila – 25. maj in Labin, Marčanka in Pula and others. A special highlight of this section were the legendary plush toys belonging to the Vavra family from Zagreb, while thanks to a cooperation with Zagreb Film, the visitors could also see some of the most popular titles of the Zagreb School of Animated Films – *Professor Balthazar* and *The Little Flying Bears*.

In parallel to the central exhibition, as part of the permanent exhibition of the Non-European Collection, different types of toys from all over the world were placed separately or inside existing display cases, highlighted as part of the exhibition *Playing around the World*, authored by museum adviser Marija Živković and museum educator Silvia Vrsalović of the Ethnographic Museum. The exhibit presented toys designed for the youngest ages, such as a necklace from Rwanda, worn by the mother, for a child to play with it while being carried in a carrier; toys for symbolic play, such as the *Litjoko* ceramic figurines of the Brazilian ethnic group Karajá, that serve to introduce girls to adulthood; sports toys, such as the props for the Brazilian game of



Picture 2. Exhibition display of the central exhibition *Toys – Childhood Forever*, Photo by Nina Koydl

*Peteca*; board games, such as a luxury chess set from China or two *Mancala* game boards from Côte d'Ivoire and Rwanda; and finally, objects often replicated as toys in the contemporary context – the Australian boomerang, and the abacus, a manual calculator known in many cultures.

As part of the project *Toys – Childhood Forever*, the interinstitutional cooperation programme *Visiting Exhibitions at the Ethnographic Museum* was devised and implemented at the representative hall on the first floor of the museum, conceived with the aim of presenting smaller exhibitions containing materials related to children's toys and games from other Zagreb museums and related institutions, and promoting artisans, artists and designers involved in toymaking. The programme was launched with the exhibition of the Croatian History Museum *Games and Toys – Witnesses of Time* (12<sup>th</sup> June – 11<sup>th</sup> July 2021) by senior curator Andreja Smetko, which presented a selection of toys and games from the 17<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This was followed by the exhibition *Toys – Making Dreams Come True* (15<sup>th</sup> July – 5<sup>th</sup> September 2021) created by museum advisor Neda Staklarević, whereby the museum hosted a visiting exhibit consisting of a selection of car models from the holdings of the Nikola Tesla Technical Museum. The third guest exhibition was a collaboration between the Museum of Contemporary Art and Zagreb Film





Picture 3. Exhibition display of the central exhibition *Toys – Childhood Forever*, Photo by Nina Koydl

titled *Unforgettable Cartoons – Little Flying Bears* (9<sup>th</sup> September – 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2021), created by museum curator Snježana Pintarić, Ph.D., which presented a selection of the original drawings for this legendary animated Croatian-Canadian co-production. The Croatian School Museum exhibited a cross-section of toys from Croatia and neighbouring countries from the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the present day as part of the exhibition *Games and Jokes for Our Little Ones* (7<sup>th</sup> – 31<sup>st</sup> October 2021), created by senior curator and archivist Sanja Nekić, while the Museum of Arts and Crafts presented the toys from its rich holdings, dating from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the 1950s, presented in the exhibition *Traces of a Romantic Childhood* (4<sup>th</sup> – 28<sup>th</sup> November 2021), created by museum adviser Arijana Koprčina, Ph.D., and senior curator Andrea Klobučar. The Advent season was marked by the authorial exhibition *Jasmina and Dolls* (4<sup>th</sup> December 2021 – 9<sup>th</sup> January 2022), devised by Zagreb designer Jasmina Kosanović, which transferred the magical atmosphere from her studio to the Ethnographic Museum and presented the doll kingdom created within it. The first visiting exhibition in 2022 was a collaborative exhibition between the

Archaeological Museum in Zagreb and the Institute of Archaeology titled *Childhood in Ancient Times* (13<sup>th</sup> January – 6<sup>th</sup> February 2022). The curatorial duo – Daria Ložnjak Dizdar, Ph.D., a senior research associate at the Institute of Archaeology, and Ivan Drmić, Ph.D., a senior curator at the Archaeological Museum in Zagreb – brought the visitors closer to childhood in prehistoric times with a selection of archaeological material from the area of continental Croatia dating back to the Bronze and Iron Ages. Taking the concept of *homo ludens* as its starting point, the exhibition of the Croatian Sports Museum, *Sport as a Game* (4<sup>th</sup> – 20<sup>th</sup> March 2022), devised by curator Marijan Sutlović, presented sporting props from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, after which the Ethnographic Museum hosted another Zagreb designer whose work focuses on toys. As part of the authorial exhibition *Vavrina kištra plišanaca* (*Vavra's Box of Stuffed Toys*), from 24<sup>th</sup> March to 17<sup>th</sup> April 2022, Lea Vavra connected the multi-generational family tradition of plush toy production with her own brand “Kištra by Vavra” by exhibiting a series of family memories and her own handmade toys. The *Visiting Exhibitions at the Ethnographic Museum* programme was closed with the exhibition of the Union of Societies “Our Children” of Croatia under the title *Time Machine of Children's Games* (23<sup>rd</sup> April – 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2022), created by Branimir Mendeš, Ph.D., and Snježana Krpes. In its seventy years of existence, the largest and oldest Croatian organization for children has collected an extensive and extremely valuable collection of children's toys and games, collected by the former Centre for Children's Toys, of which only a fraction of its rare specimens has ever been presented to the public.

Lastly, the *Toys – Childhood Forever* project ventured into virtual space exactly fifty days before its ending. Thanks to a considerable interest of the public to donate their toys and childhood memories, a virtual exhibition inspired by the children's raffle was launched. From 3<sup>rd</sup> April until 22<sup>nd</sup> May, when the toy exhibitions closed to visitors, one new acquisition was presented on the museum's website every day through a symbolic raffle draw, while on the same day, the same object was exhibited for the first time in the entrance hall of the Ethnographic Museum.

After running for almost a year, the *Toys – Childhood Forever* project not only succeeded in responding to the challenges of organising visitor activities in the face of a pandemic and earthquake renovations, but also encouraged visitors to return to the museum while also strictly adhering to the prescribed epidemiological measures. Successfully building on the results of its 2012 predecessor, the project raised the visibility of the Ethnographic Museum by creating a platform for interinstitutional cooperation through which it gradually establishes itself as the referential institution on the topic of toys and childhood culture in general. Thanks to the topic of the project, it directly contributed to new audience development by opening up the museum to the youngest visitors and their families, and becoming a zone of transgenerational dialogue. And finally, an increase in the number of donations is certainly one of the most important results of the *Toys – Childhood Forever* project, not for the sake of increasing the value of museum holding per se, but rather for the purpose of achieving one of the key roles of modern museums – building community trust and engaging its members.