

Project of Adaptation of the Permanent Exhibition of the Ethnographic Museum for the Blind and Visually Impaired

According to the information from the Croatian Register of Persons with Disabilities of the Croatian Institute of Public Health, in 2022 there were 20,526 registered people with visual impairments, of which 2,707 were registered in the City of Zagreb.¹ Although this number makes up less than 0.4% of the total population of the City of Zagreb², in accordance with the awareness of the necessity of opening museums to a wider range of users, the Ethnographic Museum in 2023 presented a project of adaptation for blind and visually impaired people. It is important to point out that the Museum has been organising programs adapted to blind and visually impaired people for years, but so far these have always been activities oriented towards organised groups that came exclusively through some of the associations in which they are brought together. This adaptation represents a step forward because it allows individual blind and visually impaired visitors to visit the Museum on their own without prior notice, at a time when it suits them.

The permanent exhibition of the Ethnographic Museum is located on two floors. On the ground floor there is a hall with exhibits from the Collection of Non-European Cultures, while on the first floor there is the permanent exhibition of Croatian folk costumes, actually a reduced and somewhat modified exhibition from 1972. With the exception of a few objects, mostly traditional furniture, objects are exhibited in glass display cases. The only interactive parts of the exhibition are an ergometer that reproduces the diary entries of the Seljan brothers in the section of Non-European Cultures and an interactive kiosk in the section with folk costumes, through which visitors can see the museum's virtual collections and play *Memory* or puzzle. From the previously mentioned, it is clear that a blind or visually impaired person, if they come alone, unaccompanied and independently of an organised group, they will remain deprived of the entire museum experience.

The project of adapting a part of the permanent exhibition was launched with the aim of opening the Museum to an even wider audience and enabling a marginalised group of users to enjoy both the Croatian and world heritage. This project was realised with the funds provided by the Ministry of Culture and Media of the Republic of Croatia, and it was implemented in

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- 1 <https://www.stampar.hr/hr/novosti/dan-bijelog-stapa-15-listopada-2022>, last accessed 30th June 2023
 - 2 According to the 2021 census, there were a total of 767,131 inhabitants in Zagreb. Available on https://www.zagreb.hr/userdocsimages/arhiva/statistika/popis%202021%20konačni%20rezultati/Popis%202021._konačni%20rezultati_Grad%20Zagreb_web.pdf, last accessed 7th July 2023

co-operation with the Typhlological Museum, which is responsible for designing the concept and methodology of adaptation. The implementation of individual features was carried out by Terriero j.d.o.o., Link 2 d.o.o. and the Croatian Library for the Blind, and the entire adaptation was designed according to the framework stipulated in the project application.

The adaptation consists of several features, some of which allow blind and visually impaired people to move independently and physically access specific locations in the Museum, while others allow them to access exhibits and their labels. The first group includes tactile markings on the floor - raised lines - and a total of six tactile maps for navigating by touch. Raised lines on the floors are placed from the entrance door of the Museum³ to the cash register, where a person can get information directly from museum employees or can review the first tactile map. It provides information about the ground floor of the Museum, the location of the halls, the location of the first tactile book and the location of the toilet, the souvenir shop and the staircase leading to the first floor. From here, the lines lead further along the ground floor of the Museum, leading the person to the toilet, two tactile maps, each showing the ground floor (the permanent exhibition hall and the temporary exhibition hall) and the first tactile book in the exhibition of non-European cultures. Tactile floor continues to the stairs to the first floor, from where they lead users to two more tactile maps for independent navigation showing the hall of the permanent exhibition and the hall of temporary exhibitions, as well as the location of the second tactile book. The tactile markings on the floor are placed all the way to the second floor of the Museum, where at the entrance to the multi-purpose hall there is the last tactile map showing the latter hall. This hall is for workshops, lectures, concerts and similar events and we considered it important to provide both blind and visually impaired users with independent access to it.

All tactile maps are simplified depictions of the museum space and on each of them the location of the person at the moment has been marked when they stand in front of it. Spaces that are inaccessible to visitors, such as offices and storerooms, are omitted from the maps so as not to confuse the users and each room is marked with a different colour for easier navigation of visually impaired people. Tactile maps are set up so that the spaces on them are shown corresponding the actual layout of the space in relation to the person standing in front of each map. This presentation method can seem confusing to sighted people because in some places the floor plans look like they are set upside down, but it is precisely this placement that allows target users easier navigation.

It is certainly important for blind and visually impaired people to move independently and navigate through the museum area, but it is perhaps more important to give them access to exhibits and their labels. The nature of museum exhibits is often an obstacle to physical access in the full sense of the word because one of the roles of museums is to preserve them. Touching museum exhibits is still impossible in most institutions, but there are ways to enable a tactile experience without worrying that the original exhibits will be damaged. The use of replicas is certainly the most common way, but considering the given framework of this project, at this stage we were not able to create replicas of the exhibits we wanted to show.

The project envisaged the creation of two tactile books with relief drawings. From the permanent exhibition of Croatian folk costumes, 18 objects were selected, and from the exhibition of non-European cultures 13 of them, i.e. a total of 31 objects were selected. Both books are

3 Unfortunately, the lines have not been placed in front of the entrance to the Museum.

structured in the same way. At the beginning of each of them there is an introductory part with information about the part of the exhibition that the book refers to, namely in black print and in Braille characters, with an audio recording accessed by scanning a QR code with one's smartphone. In the books on the left there is always text in black print and in Braille characters. It is a combination of exhibit labels, which, in addition to the name of the exhibit, also contain the locality, date, materials and dimensions and short texts that, in addition to the basic physical description, provide some interesting facts about the exhibit itself, its function or its symbolic meaning. On the right side there are always associated tactile drawings. According to the photographs of the exhibits, they were prepared by experts from the Typhlological Museum⁴, and they are simple outline drawings of exhibits without superfluous details. The lines were mostly executed in two levels of relief, with high relief used for outlines and low relief for providing individual details. Some of the more complex exhibits are presented with two relief drawings – one depicts the entire exhibit, while the other (on the same page) shows a separate detail (e.g. sleeve decoration and the like). At the bottom of the right page there are six raised dots and a QR code next to it, which allows easier activation of the audio track, which in addition to the basic information and a description of the original exhibit, contains a verbal description of the drawing.

A selection of about thirty objects does not seem like a big or demanding job, yet the task placed before the museum educators⁵ was not at all easy. Although reduced, the permanent exhibition of folk costumes is still very rich in a variety of objects. During the selection process, care needed to be taken to make sure that the selected exhibits were interesting, but that they could be simplified enough to make the relief drawing make sense. Similarly, attention has been paid to ensuring that all three ethnographic zones⁶ are at least somewhat equally represented. From this part of the exhibition, eight dolls were selected in folk costumes (Kupinec, Levanjska Varoš, the Slavonski Brod area, the Labin area, Orebić, the Perušić area, Kosore, Konavle) and ten individual objects (women's shoes from Brezovica, men's hat from Remete, bag from Kosore, heels from Slavonia, coral necklace from Kupinec, material (decorated edge of folk costume) from the Dalmatian Hinterland region, a scarf with gold embroidery from Gorjani, blankets from Kaniža and lace tablecloths from Pag and Lepoglava). From the permanent exhibition of non-European cultures, 13 exhibits were singled out and adapted – shields from Ethiopia and China, sculptures from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Solomon Islands and Nicobar Islands, a crucifix from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, a mask from Papua New Guinea, a figure of Moai kavakava from Easter Island, eucalyptus bark paintings from Australia, a netsuke (decorative fastener) from Japan, a toy litjoko from Brazil, a plume from South America and an Ethiopian basket. When selecting from this part of the exhibition, the guiding principle was the selection of various types of exhibits from as many presented cultures as possible, in order to show at least approximately the diversity and scope of the exhibition of non-European cultures.

This phase of adaptation was limited by the framework of the project application, but we hope that in the future we will be able to open the permanent exhibition of the Ethnographic Mu-

4 Željka Bosnar Salihagić, MSc, a museum advisor and Nina Sivec, a senior curator and a senior documentation specialist participated in the project. In addition to preparing tactile drawings, they also prepared verbal descriptions of exhibits and recorded audio recordings for the blind in the Croatian Library for the Blind.

5 Museum educators Anastazija Petrović and Silvia Vrsalović were in charge of the selection of exhibits.

6 The costumes exhibited in the permanent exhibition follow the division into Pannonian, Adriatic and Dinaric ethnographic-geographical zones.

seum to blind and visually impaired users even more. Since mostly textile and wooden objects are exhibited in the permanent exhibition, we believe that making replicas from the materials from which the original objects are made would be the best continuation of this project. When the financial situation allows, several objects in the exhibition of folk costumes are planned to be placed so that they could be touched. For now, a wooden carnival mask from the Medimurje area is planned, samples of fabrics that were most commonly used for making costumes (cotton, linen, wool, silk, hemp) and enlarged samples of several different types of embroidery. All these objects would also be accompanied by object labels in large black print, Braille and audio recordings. After the official presentation of the project in April 2023, the adaptation was enriched with a new object in the summer of the same year. A doll dressed in the folk costume from the Croatian area Zagorje was placed on the first floor of the Museum, along with a tactile book with exhibits from the permanent exhibition of folk costumes. It is composed of non-inventory and written-off objects, and it comprises a long shirt, a vest, an apron, a belt and a necklace. In addition to several individual blind visitors, the Museum was visited by a group of users from the Croatian Association of DeafBlind Persons Dodir in June 2023. Reactions to the adaptation are positive. According to expectations, the most interesting to them is the costume that can be touched, and they state that there should be more such objects. As they said, the experience of touching a relief drawing cannot be compared with touching a three-dimensional exhibit. We will strive to make our exhibition even more inclusive in the future and open not only to blind and visually impaired users, but also to other unfairly forgotten groups of visitors.

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