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Reaching Tradition through Play

Ethnographic Museum of Istria¹ from Pazin has opened a position for a museum educator in 2001. It broadened the educational services, which, along with the professional guided tours for all the categories of visitors, now include different workshops, playing and similar activities intended in the first instance for children².

The workshops are mainly of an occasional character and intended for children. As the Museum, for now, does not have the space in which workshops could take place, the museum educator goes to schools or day-care facilities, where she works with children. That way, the Museum leaves its space and comes nearer to the public (in this case, to the children as future visitors), that is, its activities are aimed towards the outside. This paper is an overview of the activities (occasional workshops that follow an exhibition or calendar customs, play-rooms and organized visits) through which the EMI tries to bring cultural heritage as close to the children as possible.

Educational programmes

The time we live in demands new forms of communication. Therefore, museum as an institution that collects, preserves and researches into the material culture of man has to pay a greater deal of attention to the ways of presentation of those objects to the public.

¹ In further text, I shall use EMI, the abbreviation of the Ethnographic Museum of Istria.

² The EMI's tendency is to start with the workshops for adults in the futures as well. Therefore, it is planned that a textile workshop in which the visitors will learn the skill of traditional weaving will take place in the year 2002.

Museum educator plays an important role in this process. The frames of museum education are determined by the guided tours through permanent exhibition, temporary exhibitions or workshops of the museum. Museum educator, a professional who initiates and executes educational services, often takes various contents outside the museum itself. The aim of these activities is for the children to get to know cultural heritage which they often meet, to realize its value and to be able to recognize and to preserve it.

Each programme is being prepared following a thorough plan and is being executed through several stages, depending on the theme that is being dealt with or the age group for which it is intended³. As the target group of these programmes are children, the co-operation with the educational institutions is more important. I have developed good relations between the Museum and schools and day-care facilities, as well as with the Društvo naša djeca [*Our Children Society*] and the ecological group. I try to adjust the way the activities are being held to their potentials, wishes and needs. Before any action, I consult with the school pedagogue and teachers. Teachers are the ones who work with children on everyday basis and therefore have the best insight into their potentials. I try to fit the programmes intended for the school children into their curriculum activities. We exchange information during the introductory stages of the execution of these programmes. The children are being introduced to the museum and the way it functions. I teach them how an exhibition is being made on a real example. In this case, it was the "Kruh naš svakidašnji" [*Our Daily Bread*] exhibition. Each exhibition tries to pass on the message that has to find its way to the visitor. For this purpose, it is important what is being presented, who is presenting, where, when, how and why. I explain to children that the ethnographic items that are preserved at the museum will be exhibited, and that these items are somehow connected with the production of bread. The exhibition is being jointly presented by a curator and a museum educator in the museum itself or in some other exhibition space (for example, Pučko otvoreno učilište [*Open University*] in Pazin). The exhibition usually takes place in October, which is a month devoted to food and in which we celebrate the Day of Bread. At the end, it is important to emphasize why do we present the subject, that is, whether the message that was meant to be passed on to the visitor has indeed reached him or her. The aim of the *Our Daily Bread* exhibition was to teach the younger generations and to trigger the memory of the older to the ways bread used to be made.

After such introductory talks with children, I open a discussion on how they would make the exhibition. They identify with the role of curator and it is from their ideas that the museum gets useful feedback which is considered when working on other projects.

There are different methods used in work with children. They are applicable depending on the contents of programme and possibilities, and adjusted to the age group of the children we work with.

³ For now, the programmes are made mainly for the pre-school and school children.

Workshops, and especially play-rooms, do not merely teach how to colour Easter eggs in a traditional way, how to make a mask or how bread used to be baked in baker's oven. They have to be fun as well. Playing in one of the most effective ways of learning. This element is important because it is easier for children to perceive everyday things that they meet and learn about through game. This is especially applicable to the pre-school children and younger school children. In the workshops and play-rooms intended for children with the aim of learning and getting to know cultural tradition, playing is a more effective way to reach that goal.

Another method which I use in my work with children are scale models, models, photographs and other material. As museum objects cannot be used in work with children (there is a danger of damaging the object, or it is impossible to transport it, etc.), various scale models and models that are used in museum as a means of indirect protection of the form of objects, can serve as an excellent educational tool. Visualisation is indeed very important during work, and therefore scale models enable children to see the entirety of an object.

When a project has been created, the first contact that I make with a school is an interview with a school pedagogue, to whom I present the programme. Then, as scheduled, I visit the school and talk to the teachers and pupils about what we are going to do. The children offer their opinions and add some ideas that we try to fit into the concept. After the workshop has been announced, the pupils agree with their teachers on visiting the museum and to see the objects that will later be discussed in workshops. Since there was a visiting exhibition at the EMI, called "Maske i rituali" [*Masks and rituals*], that came from Italy, the school children visited it before the carnival workshop, which was held in February 2002. Children have used motifs and ideas from the exhibition at the workshops that followed.

Project "Exhibition of children works"

Upon my arrival at the EMI, I took over a project started in co-operation with the primary school "Vladimir Nazor" from Pazin in 1999. The idea of the project was to follow a randomly selected class of students from the first to the fourth grade. Aldo Nefat, then first grade teacher, accepted the proposal, so that the project is being executed with now fourth-graders.

As I took over the project, I went to school to meet the class and we continued the co-operation. Every year, the items are collected from the pupils, at the end of the first of at the beginning of the second term. A week or two before I organize the collecting, I go to school to announce the whole action and each pupil gets a notice. The children can thus prepare themselves. Each pupil chooses one little thing that for whatever reason matter to him or her, and which is connected to the past school year. It is usually a pencil case, a toy, a drawing, an essay, a test, etc. Every pupil makes a list of his or her things and puts them in a box. When I come to class to pick up these things, I try to motivate the children to write at a piece of paper the reasons why they have selected exactly those items and we put the piece of paper in the box as well. I take the objects to the museum and put them into the storeroom, so

that they know that their things are safe and that no one is going to take them. It is very important to them, because sometimes they have a hard time parting from the things they are attached to. This way, a collection of children school items is being created. During our encounters, we usually talk about the museum and its purpose. This way, the children are getting to know the activities of museums. They have learned that the museum storeroom is a museum space in which museum objects are being kept safe. Objects are put in boxes or trunks which protect them from dust, moist and other forms of damage. Museum curators are the only ones who have access to these objects. It is quite important for the children, because many of them have asked me whether anyone would play with their things or whether they would have a chance to see them again. It matters to them that their things are safe, and they know that storeroom is the place where they indeed are safe. When those children reach fourth grade, we are going to make a common exhibition at the museum. It is going to present their way from the first to the fourth grade. Through this action, the children are learning how a collection is being created, how objects are being kept and, finally, how they are presented.

Children workshops

Museum workshops are a means of bringing museum as institution closer to children in a pleasant way, so that they could get to know its work and its basic task, as well as our cultural heritage. Workshops are intended for the pre-school and school children and they are of an occasional character (some of the segments of traditional culture are being dealt with) or they are thematically connected with the current activities of the museum, that is, with the exhibitions that are currently showing. Workshops are being held at schools, because of the lack of appropriate space of the museum itself.

A programme is created for each executed workshop. Generally, workshops consist of two parts, theoretical and practical. Collecting literature, research into the bibliographical sources and fieldwork research precede the theoretical part. Regarding workshops of occasional character (Easter, making of masks, etc.), fieldwork research is quite important, because they provide us with data connected to a certain territory. People with whom we talk can tell us how much some things connected with tradition have remained in their minds and how much of them is still present in their everyday lives. The significance of tradition in everyday life can be seen from some concrete examples. This can be best seen during the holiday season (Christmas, Easter or carnival period). For example, even today people bake *tići*, rolls shaped as birds, for Easter. These rolls used to be given to children on the Easter morning, and today it is of merely symbolical value, because it is not being given; it just makes children happy.

I use information collected this way in the theoretical part of the workshop, when I talk to children about the topic we are about to deal with. After a short introduction, the children are included in the conversation and tell me what they know or what they have heard about the topic. From such conversations it can be concluded that

the children have learned most of the things related to tradition from their grandparents. A practical part, in which make different objects, follows. We work in smaller groups, made up of two-three children, because it is more interesting for the children this way; they encourage each other to participate. My role in the practical part is to give them instructions on how they can do things and to show them, and then let them do it themselves. The way and techniques are adjusted to the children's age group.

At the end, children themselves pick the most successful objects and then either exhibit them at school or give them to the museum.

Easter workshop

The emphasis of this workshop has been put on getting to know customs related to this holiday, especially in Istria. Children are informed about the custom through stories and conversation, and then they establish which of these customs have been practiced today and which have changed. We have also described children's games that used to be played on Easter morning and made their reconstruction together.

During the practical part, we haven't coloured the Easter eggs in the traditional way (we have covered this subject in a brief lecture), but instead used the contemporary methods. Children made eggs out of cardboard and styrofoam using the technique of collage and tempera. The class was divided into four groups, and each of the pupils from a group has painted a piece of paper from which an egg was composed using the technique of puzzle. Every group has used these techniques, and traditional motifs have been used for decorating. Thus, we have combined tradition with the contemporary methods of work.

Workshops that followed the exhibition "Our daily bread"

The Ethnographic Museum of Istria has marked the Days of Bread in 2001 with a project that consisted of several stages: an educational ethnographic exhibition called "Our Daily Bread", workshops organized in schools which were thematically connected with the exhibition, the play-rooms called "The Grain Tells Its Story", held in the museum, and the exhibition of children's works created at the workshops. The events connected with this occasion were held outside the EMI. The aim was to take the exhibitions and educational activities outside the museum institution and the town of Pazin. This way, we tried to bring the activities of the museum to other areas as well⁴.

As this project was extensive⁵, and the interest of schools and day-care centres was surprisingly high, the workshops and play-rooms were held for several days.

⁴To smaller towns in the surroundings of Pazin and to the town of Poreč.

⁵The project was presented at the central school in Pazin, and when the district schools have found out about it, they have called us to hold the workshops at their premises as well.

The workshops were held at schools, and two first, two second, two third, two fourth, one fifth and one sixth grade took part in them. Since the Day of Bread has been celebrated at schools, the children were already familiar with the topic. Therefore, we emphasized the traditional way of preparing and baking of bread⁶. Several days before the workshops were due to take place, I visited every participating class in order to introduce them to the ways of work, so that they could prepare themselves. Such introduction proved to be very useful, for the children have indeed tried to find out as much as possible about the traditional bread-making. They were inspired to be small researchers and so many of them talked to their parents, grandmothers or older persons. They have noted down bread and cakes recipes, the instructions on how to build baker's oven, and some of them drew nice drawings or wrote a poem or an essay. These works, together with the ones created during the workshops, were exhibited as a side-event.

During the practical part of the workshops, the children made baker's ovens⁷, stamping-mills and grindstones out of small pieces of stone (*grotica*) using the techniques of mosaic.

Play-room "The grain tells its story"

Play-room "The Grain Tells Its Story", which was a side-event to the exhibition "Our Daily Bread", was held at the museum premises, and was intended for the pre-school children. The traditional bread-making was brought closer to children through this game.

Closer co-operation between the day-care nurses and the museum teacher was necessary for the successful implementation of this play-room. I have therefore come to the day-care nurses several times prior to the event, in order to get to know the children, but also to introduce the programme to the nurses, since they are the ones who know the children best and who know how to adjust each subject-matter to them. The play was supposed to teach the children how a small grain of corn develops into wheat, which is used for flour and eventually how bread is baked.

The play-room took place at the premises of the permanent exhibition, where ploughing tools, grindstone, baker's oven and other related items were exhibited. The space itself was very stimulating for the children and they soon identified with the game. Objects that were for this purpose brought from the storeroom, together with real wheat and other accessories were used for playing, so that children could touch and feel these objects and get their impressions about their antiquity.

After the play-room activities ended, the children have, together with the nurses, made paintings about what they have been doing in the museum. These works have been exhibited together with the works of children who attended the workshops.

⁶ From the very beginning, Olga Orlić, the curator and Mirjana Margetić, the curator-museum teacher, have participated in the project (fieldwork research, exhibition and workshops).

⁷ As the real baker's ovens were built of stone, we have used the same material in order to show the way they were built as good as possible.