

Visualization of Food in Museums – Food as Museum exhibit

Museum Exhibits with Positive Visual Effects in the Permanent Exhibition

In the open-air museum 'Staro Selo' in the village of Kumrovec a permanent exhibition titled 'Zagorje Wedding' was set in 1985 and it presented the atmosphere in the house where the traditional wedding party was being prepared. The presented interior of the house and the furniture were decorated with ribbons and flowers made of crepe-paper, and the attention of the visitors was constantly drawn to the very realistic casts of traditional wedding meals. Roast pork, roast turkey with traditional pasta (mlinci), beetroot salad, beans, pickles and lettuce were plaster casts which were painted and conserved by protective varnish. Wheat and corn bread, the traditional cake kuglof, walnut-dough cake, poppy seed-dough cake, sweet bread and a heart-shaped cake for the newlyweds were also done in the same technique. Chicken soup (ajngemanhtes) and polenta with milk, usually prepared for children, were cast in the painted silicone rubber. The decorated wedding table with realistic casts creates positive visual effects for the visitors of the thematic presentation of the exhibition 'Zagorje wedding'.

Key words: Visualization, food, cast, wedding

As the reconstruction of the *hiža mazanka* (the house which was a typical example of rural traditional architecture

from the region of Hrvatsko Zagorje), was approaching its end, it became clear that we had to come up with a scenario for the permanent exhibition entitled 'Zagorje Wedding', which would follow the strict rules of museum presentation valid at that time. The exhibition scenario was based on short-term field research of traditional wedding meals conducted during the early 1980ies in the village of Kumrovec and in around ten villages and hamlets in the surrounding area. Later the scenario was verified through commentaries of experts from several cultural institutions in Croatia and the former Yugoslavia. Since, at that period, buying off of exhibits was quite common, the reconstruction and the permanent exhibition were completed at the paste set by the renovation of particular houses or farm buildings. This was also the case with the above mentioned *hiža nanizanka*, the renovation scenario of which included all four rooms, smaller in size, equipped with household items and wedding decorations called *kinč* (flowers and garlands made of crepe-paper and hang on roof beams or placed on the pictures of saints or on the furniture). The knowledge of the proper setting of the table was passed trough generations and the table was set in the largest room in the house, called *hiža*, in the shape of the letter U.

The initial idea of the proposed scenario was to present the set wedding table with plates and cutlery but without food. However this setting did not provide an authentic museum presentation of the wedding atmosphere. The whole exhibition lacked the basic, meaningful, easily graspable atmosphere of an important segment of wedding customs in Kumrovec and the whole region of Hrvatsko Zagorje – traditional wedding meals of lasting value and importance. This lack of food models appropriated for presentation in permanent exhibition was quite obvious and it was clear that we would not be able to achieve a positive visual effect of the wedding table without them.

The professionalism of museum workers is evident not only in their professional knowledge but also highly depends on resourcefulness of individuals. Hence this resourcefulness which is an important element of our everyday job, can sometimes come in the collision with the firm scientific attitudes. Preferring flexibility as my guiding impulse, during the renovation of the Museum, I accidentally met the director of the Art Foundry from Zagreb, Branko Kelčec, academic sculptor and today a free lance artist and Miroslav Usenik, an academic painter, who accidentally visited the Museum as the associates of the former Restoration and Conservation Institute of Croatia and examined the restored objects and the ones which were still under construction. After their inspection, they commented the interior decoration of *hižica* where 'Zagorje Wedding' was set. Upon seeing the set wedding table which dominated the largest room, with all the cutlery, glass and pottery, *kupice*, earthenware, *pehari* and flower bouquets made of crepe-paper, they were negatively impressed by the incomplete, unfinished and rather vacant permanent exhibition. However, the need for a large number of exhibited food models which would satisfactorily present our selected topic did not include automatic financing which would enable us to make casts and visualize the most common wedding food. Therefore, while working on the exhibition, I came up with the idea to exhibit the set table and present the freshly baked sweet breads, cakes, and breads, made by the skillful Kumrovec women, only at the opening ceremony.

After being convinced that my idea was a failure, I quickly started to enumerate to the two interested artists all the necessary traditional wedding meals that we needed for the exhibition and for which they could make realistic casts. Shortly after that, they sent me their written offer with the described techniques and materials needed for 54 casts, which were approved for production. In spite of the significant financial costs, their tender was accepted, thanks to the director of the Museum at that time, who was very positive towards renovation and preserving genuine traditional authenticity, as long as we were following methodological guidelines of ethnographic museums.

We still had to undertake additional field research with the informants with the intention to find old and specific wedding meals which would present typical examples of the traditional diet in festive occasions, not only in the villages in the valley of the river Sutla, but also of neighboring villages. Our mutual intention was to achieve the desired effect of visualization of food in authentic surroundings using realistic approach. Some casts were molded into original pots already used in the kitchens around Zagorje. For certain meals we had to buy the appropriate earthenware from the local potters to achieve the desired effect of objective presentation of the molded objects – museum exhibits in our permanent exhibition.

I was not yet aware of the enthusiasm of the two artists, when, after a few days, I suddenly realized that they were very serious about attempting this difficult and delicate task. I frequently visited and monitored work in Branko Kelčec's studio in the village of Planina Gornja situated on one of the steep, wooded slopes of the Zagreb Mountain. Since we agreed that the food casts would be as realistic as possible I was very surprised during one of my visits by the beautiful scene that was in front of me in the yard of the studio in which a few women and men revived some past times and prepared poultry and pork to be cooked and baked in traditional way, in the baker's ovens. From the nearby house a sweet smell of homemade cakes spread all around and they were baked by the sculptor's mother with the help of the local women. The cakes and bread were baked *in the old way* in the baker's ovens. The strict baking timetable was set by the sculptor Kelčec, and was achievable due to the kindness and good will of his neighbors and co-villagers who still kept in their houses the traditional baker's ovens with the open hearth. The sculptor used the baked and cooked meat, vegetables for soup, polenta with milk, traditional wedding cakes and sweet breads and corn and wheat bread to make negatives using plaster, silicone and rubber casts. Positives were then cast in plaster and Miro Usenik then used his painter's skills to paint them to look like the real food. Cast negatives were carefully broken and the meat was very carefully extracted from them and the hosts organized a real feast for all the helpers. Cakes, breads and sweet bread, due to the porosity and fragility of the material, could not be eaten after they were cast. The painter protected the dried paint on the molds (positives) with protective varnish and he even inserted real turkey, chicken and pig bones into the cast molds so that the molds would really imitate the homemade roast.

In this ambitious thematic presentation of a segment of traditional wedding customs, the authenticity and realism of the wedding food also had to be presented and

visualized through the usage of the original pots in which the food was prepared and also brought to the table.

In the past, women used to make the famous chicken soup, *ajngemahtes*, or roux in a round three-legged pot, *trenog*, and other types of soup were cooked in deeper pots with lids, *rajngleki*. In our exhibition, chicken soup was cast and presented in a larger pot, *skledi*, which was usually used for serving the cut dried, cooked or roasted meat, the entire roast or the meals which were freshly prepared by the hostess.

Some meals are exhibited in smaller round pots, *skledice*, such as traditional pasta (*mlinci*) and salads (pickles, cucumbers with cream, beetroot salad, lettuce and beans salad, *bažul salata*). The ceremonial wedding table presents also *skledice* containing polenta with milk, an everyday meal which was commonly prepared during family festivities for the children and elderly.

Meat was baked in baker's ovens in earthenware or tin pots while wealthier families usually used pottery and enamelware of different shapes (*protvani*). The outer surface of the exhibited oval pottery *protvan* for baking turkey, *purajnk*, is covered with green glazing, while the inner surface is glazed yellow. It has a small handle on one end and on the opposite side a narrow cavity in which the neck of the turkey or duck is laced before baking. The same type of *protvan*, somewhat smaller in size, is used for baking chicken. Both casts are presented on the table in the permanent exhibition as well as the cast of cut roast turkey, while the other half of the roast is placed on the opposite side of the table next to a large *skleda* and two casts of roast pork. We have bought off a *protvan* for roasting chicken and have placed it on the wedding table, also containing a cast. Traditionally, women would put the freshly roasted meat taken out of the oven in *protvan* directly on the table or they would cut it and serve it in a larger oval pot with a small brim, *skled*, as we have shown in our exhibition. An entire roast pork dominated the centre of the table and was placed on the flat wooden base and right in front of the newlyweds, while the pig's head with the apple in its mouth was placed right on the edge of the table, on the side of the entrance. In traditional wedding customs of the Sutla valley, this head was earmarked for the masked guests (*maškare*) who came after midnight to cheer up the wedding.

There wasn't enough room on the table for all the types of cakes, breads and sweet breads that we wanted to show in matching earthenware, so, using the casts, we tried to present as many types of festive food i.e. traditional wedding delicacies as we could. Since we cooked all the meals in the old traditional iron ovens and baked them in baker's ovens and since our hostesses/cooks who were chosen for preparation of the wedding meals we agreed upon put a lot of work and enthusiasm into the project, our presented traditional meals did not differ almost at all from the festive wedding food still found today in rural settings.

All the characteristic types of traditional cakes which the women used to make on festive occasions and gatherings were also presented by the realistic casts. On the exhibition we have presented the dough-cakes and strudels with various fillings: poppy-seed cake, walnut cake, *orehov kipjeni kolač*, cheese strudel, *sirjača*, *sirov kipjeni kolač*.

The women baked all the strudels in oval or rectangular earthenware, *medenice*. Milk cake shaped as lamb, *janje*, was baked in the appropriate earthenware and each woman who took pride in her culinary skills owned at least one of them. According to the common law, the most experienced housewife could bake the wedding *lamb* for the newlyweds. The mixture of eggs, sugar, homemade butter, leaven and flour was poured into two identical earthen molds, shaped as lambs by the skillful potter. This type of cake was baked on Easter holidays and important family gatherings. The cake shaped as heart, *srce*, was the favorite one for the wedding cooks and they would make it for the newlyweds in the earthen mold of the same shape. They decorated the surface of the baked cake with vegetative and flowery motifs, using the egg white whipped with sugar and fruit syrups thus coloring their skillful decorations.

For each festive occasion or wedding they would also bake a soufflé, *kuglof*, a milk cake made of white flour with ribbed sides. They used deeper, oval molds, with or without a protrusion in the middle, called *čep*. *Kuglofi* baked in molds with *čep* in the middle have a hole in the middle, while those baked in molds without *čep* have a smooth surface.

Out of the 54 ordered casts of traditional food, 24 are exhibited in the permanent exhibition 'Zagorje Wedding'. The rest were placed in other permanent exhibitions where they could fulfill the function of thematic visualization of at least a small segment of the traditional culture of Hrvatsko Zagorje. The majority of them are exhibited in the permanent exhibition 'From a kernel to sweet bread' which presents the casts of corn, wheat and rye bread, sweet bread and cakes. The title of the exhibition necessitated the usage of expressive, realistic casts of the archived museum items, which gave the exhibition the desired effect of presenting the chosen topic in all its complexity and content.

Museum casts of the characteristic types of traditional wedding food of Hrvatsko Zagorje were made for the permanent exhibition 'Zagorje Wedding' and for the exhibitions the topic of which demanded the visual presence of food in the museum setting. By using images of traditional past from rural regions, we have fulfilled the demand for the polysynthetic artistic and museum value, which almost perfectly corresponds with the ethnographic presentation of traditional Zagorje wedding as well as with the food prepared on festive occasions. By using the casts, masterworks of the two artists, we have tried to fulfill all the demands of an *in situ* museum, an open air ethno museum which allows no room for irresponsible playing with the concepts such as authenticity, tradition and originality. Using the examples of the casts of food embedded in the traditional culture of rural diet from the region of Hrvatsko zagorje we have presented the explicit visualization of wedding meals of realistic outlook and with the positive effect in the permanent exhibition.

Translated by Tanja Bukovčan