

Nada Matijaško

Muzej prehrane „Podravka“

Koprivnica

nada.matijasko@podravka.hr

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## Museum Alimentarium in the Town of Vevey, Switzerland

*Museum of food in the town of Vevey (foundation of Nestle Company) is trying to offer to the general public the answers to a number of questions about the relationship between man and food. This article brings out the description of the new permanent exhibition set in Alimentarium in 2002 and the outline of the museological study of Martin R. Schärer (director of Alimentarium, historian and museologist) on the process of musealization of objects, different ways of their presentation (presentation languages) and on visualization as a means of selection of objects, illustrations and other methods with the purpose to emphasize the multitude of meanings the objects can have for the museum visitor.*

**Key words:** permanent exhibition, Alimentarium, musealization

I visited the Museum Alimentarium in October 2002 during my stay in Switzerland on the 14<sup>th</sup> international conference of ethnologists interested in the research of food. The conference was organized by the International Commission for Ethnological Food Research which was founded in 1970 as part of the Société Internationale d'Ethnologie et de Folklore (SIEF).

Since I work at the Museum of Food Industry in the town of Koprivnica which is financed by the Podravka company and Alimentarium is the museum which is financed through the foundation established in 1980 by the Nestle company, the world's largest company in the food industry, I have been often told by many people in Podravka, which has been cooperating with Nestle since 1969, that I should visit Alimentarium. A lucky coincidence was that I visited it only recently in October 2002, because it was completely renovated in June 2002.

Museum Alimentarium is situated in the town of Vevey, in urban setting, on a street on the banks of the Lake Geneva, in the first Nestle's administrative building built from 1916 to 1920 in neo-classicist style.

The first permanent exhibition was opened in 1985 and it covered three scientific disciplines: biology, ethnology and history, which were strictly divided into three museum sections. Due to the renovation, the Museum was emptied completely from 2000 to 2002. This was an excellent opportunity for designing a new concept of the museum. It would no longer be multi-disciplinary (each section organized by the principles of a particular discipline), but would become inter-disciplinary in each section, using new multi-media and more content aimed at the improved communication with the audience.

Permanent exhibition is situated on the ground and the first floor of the museum, on the surface of around 800 m<sup>2</sup>, while the second floor is reserved for temporary, thematic, exhibitions (usually one major exhibition per year, from March till January next year).

With the intention to satisfy the visitors' needs as well as possible, it was decided that the findings on different ways of food preparation should be presented already in the ground hall, together with the equipment needed for food preparation and storage and knowledge on various kinds of food and its usage in everyday dining. Comparative examples of the kinds of food from various historical periods and through different cultures have been presented and the exhibition problematizes certain topics such as famine, symbolical meanings of food, influence of social norms on food and dining, etc. Generally, food is here put into the limelight, i.e. the relationship between man and food. Since the museum does not function only as an exhibition, but is also the place where many workshops and presentations are held, it seemed the most appropriate to place these activities also on the ground floor. A large contemporary kitchen is also displayed here which forms an integral part of the permanent exhibition but also serves as a place for demonstration of culinary skills. The visitors can daily observe the professional cooks prepare the food and explain the techniques used, the types of groceries needed and also provide the visitors with the information on historical and ethnological context of the meals and their nutritional values. Here, in front of the visitors, the food is being prepared for the museum restaurant and in the afternoons, the visitors can participate in 45-minute culinary workshops. Reservations for culinary workshops have to be made in advance and they are not included in the price. Very inventive is the presentation of different types of kitchen equipment and stoves. They form a part of the permanent exhibition and, since they are displayed on moveable trolleys, they can be pushed to any part of the exhibition and the food can be prepared there, as required by an event or an exhibition. Vegetables and herbs used in the museum kitchen are grown in the garden around the museum (the existence of the garden is quite surprising since the museum is situated in the urban setting). For children from 6-12 years old there is Alimentarium Junior.

Permanent exhibition on the first floor is, on one hand, taking the visitor one step back, towards food provision (agricultural or industrial production of food, gathering, buying of food in markets, stores or supermarkets, comparing data on expenditure, food safety

and health regulations) and on the other hand, one step forward, towards findings on the digestion of food in human organism. In this section of the exhibition the person-visitor becomes, with the help of information technology, both a subject and an object of the exhibition because the visitors can here take some tests of their senses, tests to evaluate their metabolism and analyze their dietary habits.

On the first floor there is also the so-called 'Nestle room', dedicated to the history of the company, its founder Henry Nestle and the first products. This is the only section of the exhibition where the historical approach was used entirely.

Since Alimentarium is a specialized museum for study and presentation of food, visualization of food is one of its key elements. Martin R. Schärer, the director of Alimentarium, art historian and museologist, dealt extensively with this topic. Before the museum was closed, he made one last round around the museum. He revised certain sections of the exhibition and his findings were crucial in organizing the new exhibition. His observations were published in the brochure titled *An Exhibition Revisited* (2002)<sup>1</sup>, which would be shortly presented here.

Every object has a meaning, has a certain function. In a museum it is impossible to reproduce an original context of an object in its primary form, a living context. However, every object, inside and outside of the museum can give certain satisfaction, arouse memories, recognition, stimulate thoughts, which gives this object a new dimension.

We are literally swamped with objects: useful and useless, beautiful and ugly, valuable and worthless. We have to live with them. Our desire for ownership is incessant. This is because we do not want to give them up. We provide them with new meanings, we keep them for their value or beauty, as souvenirs, witnesses, symbols, we collect them. Museums keep objects for the sake of the people. In the Alimentarium these are the objects related to food. The main issue is always the relationship between man and food. People are the ones who need objects, evaluate them, love them, throw them away or keep them. Objects are what they are because of the people, their individual notions of worth, value, beauty, information, symbolism, preciousness (of the object). After all, we accept and musealize objects in museums exactly because of these added values which require explanation and interpretation.

Martin Schärer explains it further: museum objects are in themselves mute. Relics of the past do not reveal anything about their existence in the real world. The past is gone forever, no one can tell what has really happened. The history can not be reconstructed. Every attempt to do this represents only one possible interpretation based on the existing documents or objects. Objective historical truth does not exist, what exists are

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<sup>1</sup> Schärer, Martin R. *An Exhibition Revisited. Musings of a Museologist in the Alimentarium*, 2002, Alimentarium, Vevey.

only accounts which are trying to create an image out of the events which have probably happened.<sup>2</sup>

On the example of Alimentarium, Martin Schärer defines different types of exhibition languages. These are: aesthetic language of exhibition (the object provides pleasure), theatrical language (excites emotions), didactical language of exhibition (the object educates). If the objects in a museum are exhibited in such a way that they are following the principle of only one exhibition language, the results will be poor. However, the most common principle in practice is to combine different exhibition languages.

Step by step, by listing examples of exhibitions which tell stories about objects, where the object is selected for a good reason, illustration full of meaning, text short but up to the point, and through the usage of technology, we will arrive to the exhibition language which is satisfactorily aesthetic and didactic, somewhat theatrical and which still manages to incite the visitor to thinking and questioning. This language is called by Schärer 'an associative exhibition language'<sup>3</sup> because it speaks about the object in all its complexities and all the values added by the man.

And here the museologist comes to the scene – an expert who possesses scientific weapon for studying and shading light on this specific aspect of human behavior, that (strong) human need for respecting material world in everyday life, i.e. the need for musealization of objects.

Since in a museum, as emphasized before, we can not reconstruct the history, which is irretrievable, we can visualize the absence of the established circumstances – present them, explain (illustrate), using the object as signs. Here by illustration we do not necessarily mean things that can be seen, but this can also refer to the things which we can receive by other senses.

As a conclusion I would like to emphasize that visualization is a professional (museological) selection of objects to be presented in front of an audience and which results in an exhibition as a system of meaning. For visualization of food therefore, it is not crucial whether we choose to exhibit cooked and highly perishable foodstuffs or whether we would use supplements made of artificial materials, a photography, etc., but the quality of meaning (aesthetic, informative, symbolic, emotional, allusional, etc.) we have managed to create for the visitors.<sup>4</sup>

*Translated by Tanja Bukovčan*

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<sup>2</sup> This paper was written as a contribution for the scientific conference 'Visualization of Food in Museums' held on February 26, 2007 in the Ethnographic Museum in Zagreb as part of the exhibition 'World of Food in Croatia'. The discussion showed that some of the conference participants did not agree with this theoretical standpoint. This was particularly true for art historians who, due to the very nature of their discipline, could really have a different attitude since the works of art are not in themselves mute, on the contrary, a work of art reveals to the observer everything it has to reveal. However, objects exhibited in the Alimentarium are not works of art, but objects from a broad spectrum of living culture, limited only by a vaguely determined topic of 'man and food'. If we exhibit such objects in a museum without interpretation, then the museum does not fulfill its function and is not really a 'museum' but only a 'collection'.

<sup>3</sup> Engl. Associative = suitable for combining, merger

<sup>4</sup> At the conference, we could also hear an opinion that a more appropriate title would have been 'food visualizing' since here the most important would have been the selection of the best possible presentational media, and that other interpretations and contextualizations were not necessary because the museum visitor should be left to search for the meanings of the objects himself/herself, and that they should not be served on a platter.