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Some Ethnological Dilemmas Regarding the Presentation Concept of the Croatian Tradition¹

Present activities of the Ethnographic Museum of Zagreb are characterized by the efforts to develop a detailed concept of the new permanent exhibition. This paper intends to present my considerations and dilemmas on this issue.

Key Words: museum exhibitons, permanent exhibitons, Ethnographic Museum Zagreb

The current permanent exhibition has been designed in the late sixties and early seventies of the 20th century and was implemented simultaneously with the reconstruction of the building. Intensive work resulted in an exhibition of high aesthetic value, based on ethnological tenets of the first half of the 20th century.

The concept of content distribution in the reconstructed building showed certain disadvantages in practice, which is why today's permanent exhibition differs to a certain extent from the original one. Modifications were actually limited to the ground floor, which was used to present themes from the domains of economy, textile handicrafts, ceramics and basket weaving. The ground floor premises are now mainly used for temporary exhibitions, since the longstanding practice of staging exhibitions on the fourth floor, as originally projected, proved to have considerable shortcomings.

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The basic concept of the original exhibition nevertheless remained visible to the present. It is based on:

- a division of Croatia into cultural zones
- a predominance of textile, i.e. the folk costume
- the exclusive presentation of representative exhibits

Now that it finally seems to be possible to realize the new permanent exhibition after years of efforts, I would like to explain in this paper my attitude towards the current permanent exhibition and formulate some problems I believe could arise in the detailed development of the concept of the new permanent exhibition. First of all, I consider it necessary to comment on the division of Croatia into three culture zones, which was considered by some Croatian ethnologists outdated even as far back as in 1972, when the current exhibition was staged. The dominance of folk costumes was justified by the fact that this material comprised the major part of the Museum's holdings. However, this leads us to the question: is the main role of the central Croatian ethnographic museum to present its own holdings, or the culture of a region? Finally, to what extent is it right to create an idealised picture of our own culture by presenting only representative exhibits, trying to convince others and ourselves of its objectivity?

The division of Croatia into three cultural zones - the Pannonic, the Dinaric and the Adriatic - was established in the 30s of the 20th century by the doyen of Croatian ethnology, Milovan Gavazzi. At that time, the field of ethnology was limited to the research of rural culture of the pre-industrial age, i.e. to the period of the second half of the 19th and the first half of the 20th century.

To illustrate this division, I will give just a few examples for each zone:

Pannonic zone:

The houses in this region face the street with their narrower side. The furniture is high (the so-called "high-horizon furniture"). After the harvest, the grapes are processed in special buildings in the vineyard, used also to store the wine. Animal husbandry is based on stable breeding and pig breeding in herds (100 - 200 pigs) grazing freely in woods. Clothing is dominated by textile of plant origin.

Adriatic zone:

The basic construction material is stone. The upper floor of the house is accessed over out-doors stairs ending in a stone terrace. The links of the chain holding the pot over an open hearth are circular. Land is fenced off by drystone walls (walls made of stone without binding material). Economy relies on fishery, seafaring as well as the growing of wine grape and olives. Wine and oil is kept in typical cellars in house basements. The breeding of donkeys and mules is typical for animal husbandry. Men's clothing is characterized by relatively short pants with wide back parts

(on the island of Krk and in the region of Konavle), as well as woollen caps with long, sometimes shoulder-long cones.

Dinaric zone:

The basic construction material is wood. Roofs of houses are covered by trimmed shingles. The links of the chain holding the pot over an open hearth are wrought in the shape of number "8". The furniture is low, the so-called "low horizon furniture". An important characteristic of the economy is transhumant sheep breeding. Clothing is made mainly of woollen materials. The use of caps with flat tops is characteristic for this zone.

The basic objection to this division is that it refers to a precisely defined period, i.e. the period of the late 19th and early 20th century: the described characteristics of "traditional culture zones" were typical only for this period. The historical, social and cultural situation before and after this period is completely different.

In the second half of the 20th century, ethnology starts being perceived as a science dealing with folk culture in general, both rural and urban, over various periods to the present time.

Although the tripartite division is mainly regarded in expert circles as outdated, it is still present in practice in professional circles. I see the main reason for such dichotomy between theory and practice in the fact that this way of considering and presenting traditional culture is simple and practical: the scope of work is clearly delimited, both in terms of time and space. A certain geographic area is dealt with on a descriptive level, focusing on characteristics of the pre-industrial rural culture. Links with science are established through analyses of an equally precisely determined rural culture of a neighbouring (or distant) area, and comparisons are used to draw conclusions about mutual influences and possible migrations. In addition, many ethnologists seem to use this division because there is no better alternative, without considering that culture could be researched also without the geographical division into areas. Geographical and political limitations, however, apply the activity of a certain institution. The scope of activity of the Zagreb Ethnographic Museum, for instance, is mainly limited by the borders of the Republic of Croatia.

How should then a permanent exhibition of a museum presenting a certain culturally heterogeneous space look like? Alternatively to its division into cultural zones, we could present the material through the analysis of certain themes, such as the cycle of annual or life customs, the monographic presentation of smaller cultural units or the monographic presentation of the Republic of Croatia as a whole, by using selected elements of culture to present the entirety of folk life on its territory.

I believe that each of these approaches is in principle equally good and that its quality in the end depends on the quality of realization. However, every presented element of culture should offer more than bare information about its function, provenience (place of origin, use or purchase) etc. It should teach us also about the wider social context in which this element functioned and about intercultural associations

to which it bears witness. A visitor of such an exhibition should learn about the links of the referenced culture with other cultures and understand (especially in case of his/her own culture) that it does not exist on its own and that it did not emerge by itself. By teaching the visitors about the richness of culture and intercultural links, we are teaching them tolerance.

On such assumptions, the flat-topped cap and the hemispherical ceramic device for roasting food on open fire ("peka") would be presented as Paleobalkan elements rather than elements of the Dinaric culture zone, the pants from the island Krk as an element belonging to the wider Mediterranean area rather than as an "Adriatic zone" object, while the headgear from the island of Pag ("rub") would be presented as a Slavic cultural element.

I have observed another shortcoming of the current permanent exhibition, which also appears in the exhibitions of many other museums: the fragmentation of the past into segments associated to certain professions. Of course, such fragmentation is necessary to enable more thorough analyses of the problems. However, it seems to me that the visitor mainly gets the impression that the people of the past lived various "professions" (rather than living in various circumstances). The artistic aspect of their life (as shown in art galleries) seems to be separated from the ethnographic aspect (as shown in ethnographic museums), which is in turn separated from the historical aspect (as shown in history museums)...etc. This is often contributed by the imprecise dating of ethnographic objects, i.e. the fixing of the time of their origin and use. I have the impression that the interested visitors perceive such exhibits as objects belonging to the past, but without a clear understanding which period they belong to. The visitors also do not know whether all these objects belong to the same or to different periods. They are even less aware of what was happening in the world or in the surroundings of the peasant who was using the hoe exhibited here, or at what time the production of the folk costumes from home-made materials was abandoned, or how the situation and the life in villages were affected by various political events.

What is necessary is, naturally, a multidisciplinary presentation, in which the ethnographic material would dominate, while material from other domains would be used for orientation purposes. To take the Ethnographic Museum of Zagreb as illustration, I will mention only some examples that I believe should be used as historical landmarks. This is, firstly, the Austrian and Austro-Hungarian rule, under which the Pannonian villages took the shape of settlements organized along a main street and when the organisation of the Croatian Military Frontier (Vojna krajina) had a considerable influence on the way of life at the border with the Ottoman Empire. Another historical landmark would be the activity of the "Croatian Peasant Party" and its leader Stjepan Radić which strongly influenced the Croatian village in the first half of the 20th century. An important historical influence was also the collectivisation of farms through the establishment of the "peasant work cooperation societies" with the rise of socialism, etc.

In addition, folk design and decoration should be placed in relation to European art styles, especially the Baroque, which had a strong influence on folk art.

However, how will we evaluate the quality of this realization? If our objective is a museum exhibition that would educate about the culture of a certain region, then the answer about the quality would be actually the answer to the following questions:

- does the exhibition provide only an insight into the inventory of cultural phenomena (is it only descriptive) or does it teach us about the meaning of such phenomena, their origin, how they became a part of the referenced culture, the wider context in which they functioned, and

- is the presentation adapted (professionally and technically) to various levels of interest and capabilities of the visitors, i.e. does it offer every interested visitor the type and quantity of information corresponding to his education and reception abilities.

I have intentionally avoided here the term "visitor of average education", otherwise frequently used in this context, because I believe that the exhibition should be educative both for the undereducated and the overeducated visitor. In my view, the museums should take this direction to improve their methods. Precisely this is their task in terms of children and adult education.

Finally, I would like to express my belief that a high-quality exhibition of any ethnographic museum institution should present the ethnographic material in the context in which individual cultural elements were created, functioned in and disappeared from everyday life. Presented in a systematized way, this would include the following contexts:

- the political context (e.g. influence of politics on folk culture, the use of folklore and its symbols for political purposes...)

- the economic context (e.g. the influence of the phylloxera (vine pest) on rural life in the late 19th century)

- social context (e.g. the exchange of cultural elements between social classes, the breakdown of peasant extended families...)

- the historical context (influence of various historical events: World War I and II, the socialist rule - establishment of "peasant work cooperation societies" - *kolkhozes* /collective farms...)

Translated by Sanja Novak