
ARE WE YOUNG OR OLD?

Some thoughts upon the 80th anniversary of our museum

Eighty years! For us, people, this usually is the age when we are taking our leave, departing step by step, because life's circle is closing, even though we may live to be ninety or even a hundred. For a museum, eighty years of operation is not a short period either; in particular if it is in fact more than twice that old. The Slovene Ethnographic Museum was formally established in 1923, but its real year of birth is undoubtedly 1833, when it was conceived in the form of three miniature models of agricultural implements – a cart, a plough, and a harrow – the first specimens in the ethnographic collections of the museum's unavoidable predecessor – The Carniolan Provincial Museum. The aura of age that adorns the museum is thus even brighter. But whatever the museum's age – eighty or one hundred seventy years – it is one of the oldest museums in Slovenia. And what is more, regardless of the "burden" of age, we are far from saying goodbye, because in so many ways we are just arriving.

The museum may be compared to a young family that has finally received the key to its own flat. Now the flat needs to be decorated and furnished to make it pleasant for the family to live in and to friendly welcome visitors, its guests. The family also has to consider how to arrange its life in the new dwelling. The Slovene Ethnographic Museums had to wait 80 or even 170 years before it obtained premises of its own for its basic activity – an exhibition building. In this building the programme of the museum's exhibitions, educational activities and events can now gradually unfold in all its richness, diversity and comprehensiveness.

But do we already have a vision in our minds, what our museum will be like or how different it will be now – in its own premises? We certainly should have such a vision. Without clear ideas and concepts it would not have been possible to renovate and reconstruct the exhibition palace we waited for so long. Personally, I can answer the question positively, because the basic elements of this vision were written down several years ago; since 1996 we have managed to materialise them in many ways and the exhibition building now represents the solid, material basis for museum's integral vision, which can only be rounded off and completed through

the planned programme. The building will become this programme's perfectly suitable, enchanting spatial envelope.

Should I say more about the museum's history? Right now and in spite of the anniversary, I would prefer not to dwell again on its many known and unknown stories – charming ones, sad ones, and fascinating ones – as they are told bit by bit in this volume of *Etnolog* in articles which are dedicated to these eighty years. The history of an institution may be the core of the answer to the first of all the basic questions we have to ask ourselves when considering our vision and mission: What is this museum? What is its present reality? What are we doing and why? Why does it exist, for whose sake? What do we expect from the future and what do our visitors want? What can we achieve what we want to achieve? All these questions have been answered many times in the Slovene Ethnographic Museum in the past decade and a half, and they were answered several times in earlier periods. The perhaps most comprehensive answer, however, dates from 1996, when we prepared a document entitled "The project called the Slovene Ethnographic Museum" (*Etnolog* 6), in which we set out our vision of the development and programme for the "new" ethnographic museum based on historical development and theoretical (ethnological and museological) viewpoints, in the following chapters: *Institution, premises, money; A view of the collections, the significance of the objects and some definitions of the museum and its permanent exhibition*, and *The road towards a permanent exhibition*.

For the museum's location in the former barracks in Metelkova we envisaged a museum of the kind, which in professional circles has been referred to in recent years with the syntagm of a "friendly museum" – a notion that is as fashionable as it is rich in context and complex. The vision we let ripen is one of a modern, internationally comparable, and friendly ethnographic museum, a lively cultural, scientific and educational institution, which will offer to its visitors not only attractive exhibitions, other events and museum workshops, nor only the opportunity to discover, learn, enjoy, co-operate, create, dream, and reflect, but also everything that will make them feel comfortable. We planned a museum that will take care of its holdings in accordance with the relevant international standards for their safety, including the conditions they are kept or exhibited in. Our concept envisages an institution that will provide its staff with meaningful connections between the different processes of museum work and offer them a pleasant, stimulating work environment.

The two buildings in Metelkova were divided into three interconnected units: 1. A big exhibition building, dedicated entirely to the public – with rooms for the permanent exhibition and occasional ones, museum workshops, a museum shop and bookshop, a coffee house etc.; 2. A small administrative building for management, information, research, audiovisual, conservation, restoration, and other activities – with a public reading room and lecture room, etc.; and 3. An underground museum depot between the two buildings and connected with both.

This programme vision became the framework for the museum's long-term development goals and they are now being achieved step by step:

- The renovation and reconstruction of the two museum buildings. In the smaller building activities started in 1997, and the exhibition building will be opened to the public in December 2004.
- Execution of the projected permanent exhibition "COUNTERPOINTS OF LIFE, Ethnological stories about everyday and festive life". In 1997, the project was experimentally installed with two sample sections *Doors to a circle- About birth and early childhood in Slovenia* and *A Cabinet of Curiosities- The Baraga Collection of Native American objects*. Further projects under execution are the creation of the first section of the exhibition *Between Nature and Culture*, which will be on view from December 2004 onwards. The second section of the permanent exhibition *Me, we, and the others* is planned to be installed over the next four to six years. And after it is finished, the principle of having twelve stories combined into a harmonious whole will make it possible for individual themes to be exchanged.
- Ensure depots with proper ambient conditions. The museum's material will be gradually moved to the new premises in 2004 and 2005.

Our fourth goal – to ensure proper staff development – is closely connected with the tree above-mentioned development goals. Because of the new exhibition building, this has now become quite indispensable in the field of museum programmes. Our vision of the collections and scientific research activities connected with them has been put into practice to quite some extent over the past eight years: a second curator for non-European cultures was appointed as well as a second curator-librarian; two new departments were established: for the Slovene emigrants, Slovene minorities in the neighbouring countries and the ethnical minorities in Slovenia, and for spiritual culture; furthermore, a curator for ethnographic film was appointed, etc. In 1996 the museum's staff had twenty-five members, today thirty.

In spite of the initially temporary, improvised exhibition rooms, the Slovene Ethnographic Museum "lived up" at the new location in accordance with its programme vision of a modern European museum of cultural identities (a museum that is part of the national cultural identity with all its contents). It now turned into a museum in line with the vision of a "museum about and for people", a cultural venue and meeting point; a museum that provides a venue for the dialogue between the national culture and foreign cultures, a museum that is a link between the past and present, between nature and civilisation. The execution of such a programme vision meant that every year a cycle of exhibitions, lectures, concerts, workshops, and other events was carried out – presentations of Slovene cultures and ways of life (in all these years, these presentations were interpretations of individual museum collections by their authors) as well as presentations of the cultures of the Slovene minorities abroad, other European and non-European cultures, and individual cultural elements and ways of life, including cultures and life styles of the members of foreign ethnicities living in Slovenia. This programme

concept, which has become the trademark of our institution, could well be maintained in the following years, provided constant efforts are made to improve the already high quality of the programme. Major changes will be necessary within the Slovene section of the programme. Here, thematic exhibitions on individual collections (these will be presented in the relatively permanent section of the exhibition *Between Nature and Culture*) may be replaced with thematic exhibitions on specific issues; in addition to offering modern interpretations of past themes, they would open up a dialogue on individual topical themes from everyday contemporary life.

30 Still going strong at age eighty or even a hundred and seventy, we certainly will not run out of work, even if we did much more than dream in recent years. In fact, revived as we were, we achieved quite a number of the set goals. The museum's last constituent act (adopted in 2003) describes its mission and the staff's tasks quite clearly: *The basic mission of the museum is to foster the study and understanding of the material cultural heritage of everyday and festive ways of living, the intangible heritage of knowledge, values, techniques, wisdom, and creativity in the Slovene ethnic territory, in the Diaspora and elsewhere. By presenting the cultural diversity of the Slovene ethnic territory, taking account of time and society as variables, and also of its embeddedness in the wider regional, continental and global civilisation framework, the museum promotes the development of a positive attitude to the nation's cultural heritage, intercultural connections and foreign cultures, and explores the Slovene attitude to differences. The museum carries out its mission based on collections from the following fields: the culture of economic activities and transport, crafts and trade, dwelling culture, textiles and clothing culture, social and spiritual culture, the culture of the artistic horizon (folk art and art sources), the culture of the Slovene emigrants, ethnic minorities and non-European cultures.*

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