

THE ZAGREB CITY MUSEUM: AN APPROACH TO THE DIGITAL MUSEUM CATALOGUE COMBINING MATERIAL AND NON-MATERIAL CULTURAL HERITAGE INFORMATION

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This report describes the ongoing project for the museum digital catalogue which is not only meant to be a traditional catalogue describing physical museum objects, but also a presentation of non-material cultural heritage information about the city and its people. While working on this main long-term project we are simultaneously producing smaller in-house electronic publications covering various themes from the city life, as well as publishing materials that accompany the museum's current exhibitions and events. Furthermore, these publications are an attempt to communicate both material and non-material cultural information to visitors and wider community and provide the most expedient way of addressing the public.

The project was started with two questions in mind:

- Must museum documentation be necessarily boring to non-professionals?
- Do we have the right to imagination and dream?

According to our research, the public is more interested in the non-material heritage information covering the city's culture of living, its flavours and mystery, than in the standard museum documentation describing collections and material objects. By providing these two types of cultural information together we have a chance to be different in the world of globalisation. Any form of non-material cultural heritage documentation is an additional opportunity for small communities to preserve their cultures and express their differences.

As the leading city museum in Croatia we can provide a model for other regional history museums in the country and encourage them to develop and extend their communication with the public beyond the traditional museum documentation concept.

The Zagreb City Museum, founded in 1907, is the largest city museum in the Republic of Croatia. The Museum collects, keeps and displays the material and non-material evidence of history and the present of Croatia's capital. In 1998, the Museum building was thoroughly renovated and the collection exhibited in keeping with the most recent museological concepts and experience. The new presentation of the collection has made the Museum a representative portrait of the city and the keeper of its spirit.

In 2001, when we commenced the project involving a digital multimedia catalogue of the permanent display on a CD-ROM (and a future version on a DVD medium), we took into consideration not only the museum objects as material evidence of cultural heritage but also the information that contributes to the spiritual, i.e. non-material portrait of the city. Our intention was to conceive our product as something that will present the atmosphere, the life-style and the special feel of the city. We wished to create a different type of catalogue just as we had succeeded in creating and carrying out a different concept in presenting the permanent collection, so unlike the presentations of collections housed in other regional history museums. We felt that a catalogue containing standard

database records of museum objects with their photographs would not suffice in presenting the heritage housed in the museum. Furthermore, we were of the opinion that such type of information was more suitable for experts but less so for the general audience.

The professional community in our country is small. According to the data of the Museum Documentation Centre from November 2000, Croatia has 719 museum experts in 202 museums. Are we to go ahead with such a project just for them? Who, apart from the museum experts, historians and art history and museology students, would be interested in a museum catalogue of any kind, digital or not? Naturally, the easiest task would be to produce a standard type catalogue with information describing the museum collection that can be searched and selected. With this sort of documentation there would be no serious problems as we can see, hear, touch and describe any museum object. We can see every object in a photograph, read about it and trace its life in the museum documentation. To help with this, today we have at our disposal excellent databases and a variety of search methods. We have available a whole industry of communicating data and knowledge.

In addition to the information on the material heritage objects in our keeping, we had set ourselves the task to incorporate in our product the information covering various aspects of non-material cultural heritage. Being a history museum we have a responsibility to the community not only to preserve the material forms of cultural heritage but also to protect and preserve the vanishing culture of living. We wish to make our product available to schools, tourist offices and all segments of community. Experience tells us that the public is frequently more interested in the stories and anecdotes related to museum objects, in the vanishing culture of living, in the people and events, rather than in the data describing the physical aspects of a museum object. People like to feel the mysterious in the cultural heritage. In the world of globalisation we strive to preserve our uniqueness against the general and the faceless. This is why we wanted a multimedia product with the taste of the city that stirs the imagination and dreams, rather than just being didactic. Why not, for example, along with the stories of the city and its people, put in old-fashioned recipes for dishes that people cooked in the 18th century, or music that was played in the 1920s cabarets?

We did not wish to impose our expert and institutional authority and inundate the public with huge amount of dry scientific information. Instead, we strove to provide comprehensive information that will comprise both material and non-material aspects of our heritage. We wanted our catalogue to give the audience an opportunity to encounter, search and select attractive museum objects and to feel the spirit of the city that lies behind them.

We set these project goals:

- responsibility to the community
- support of community development
- understanding identity
- preserving the unique in the face of the general and nondescript
- stimulating public awareness of the value of heritage
- knowledge communication.

We have moved away from the traditional approach of dividing museum material into collections. Our vision was to produce a thematic catalogue. The themes illustrate various aspects of city life in the past and today, such as religion, city administration, handicrafts and artisans,

education, punishments and superstitions, city societies and social life, sports, theatre, everyday living, etc.

With defined themes it was easier to make the connections between the material and the non-material cultural information. Inventory books stored in databases are linked to the database containing the cultural and historic context records – the people, institutions, historic places and events. The goal was to establish a system for recording and using information on the non-material that will function as a parallel and a complement to the system of information on the material world. The information on the non-material is first identified in the world of material objects. This information is a process and knowledge, that will eventually end up in the material world in the form of documentation, book, exhibition, multimedia product, etc.

The process of information structuring and information selection in the case of non-material heritage is complex and does not easily fit into the usual models of museum documentation. Technology opens up wide access to enormous amount of information with the ensuing problem of selection and orientation in a crowd of insufficiently evaluated data. Simultaneously with the work on the main project, we also publish annually two to three smaller products on CD-ROM covering various themes from city life. So far we have published the city's chronology, life in a Zagreb street as seen in the work of a famous woman artist who lived there, sports in the city, etc.

Today, every digital multimedia museum product can offer a virtual walk through a museum and a multitude of information that may be searched according to different criteria. How are we to identify them? How are the users supposed to find their way around and among the multitude of insufficiently evaluated data? None of the sophisticated tools will help us select the relevant information. They will make our task easier but the selection will always be ours according to our criteria and intuition.

We are facing endless challenges and numerous problems. Documentation of non-material cultural and historic heritage is subject to abuse and arbitrary interpretation to a much higher degree than is the case with documenting material objects. This puts on us all the more responsibility. A museum is an information producer. The public should also participate and express their needs and suggestions. The public must become the users of the values inherent in the material and non-material heritage. Ideally, the public should actively participate as museum consultants and assist in interpreting and recording the non-material cultural heritage.

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