



# THE ROLE OF MUSEUMS IN THE DEMOCRATIZATION OF SOCIETY, WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE ZAGREB CITY MUSEUM

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*Zagreb City Museum, Croatia*

The Zagreb City Museum is one of Croatia's oldest city museums. It was founded in 1907 and has been based in its current location since 1947. Adequate exhibition space was provided in 1998, when a dedicated centre for the permanent exhibition was opened. The Museum is located in the oldest part of the city's core, within a space that includes the 13<sup>th</sup> Century Popov Tower, the medieval embankments and the 17<sup>th</sup> Century Convent of St Clare.

Globalization has resulted in the democratisation of knowledge, which is why museums must seize the moment and utilise their unique position as stewards of original testimonies from the past to their advantage. New technologies, for all their potential, cannot replace the charm and distinctiveness of original objects which contain information about the time they were made or the people who constructed and used them. The media through which this information can be transferred may vary and can depend upon several factors, but the overall aim must be to disseminate knowledge in a way that brings museums to a wider range of social groups and fully integrates them into community life.

Some fifteen years ago, the Pedagogical-Adult Education Department of the Zagreb City Museum, guided by these principles, began to expand its focus from conventional educational institutions to include institutions involved in diversifying civil society, institutions for the elderly and in-

firm and institutions that care for the disabled. All of the Museum's activities were organized to include and link up with the widest possible range of potential visitors despite their differences, and in many ways this is the mission of the Museum: to create a locale that is important to Zagreb and all of its inhabitants where they can explore their differing interests.

This resulted in various workshops, publications and exhibitions which not only aimed to familiarise these specified target groups with the concept of heritage, but also raised public awareness of the problems faced by the disabled and other marginalised and vulnerable social groups.

The first question was: how and in what way?

The first contact and cooperation with these institutions was almost by accident. The public were invited to participate in an archaeological heritage workshop, and amongst those who responded were the *Association for the Promotion of Inclusion* and the *Association of the Deaf-Blind 'Dodir' ('Touch')*. The people who make use of these associations operate in a completely different emotional, physical and mental way to the usual museum visitor. It soon became apparent that they perceive and interact with their environment in a specific way. Consequently, the approaches and methods adopted had to be adapted to include specialized people to work with this segment of the population. In this case, this involved cooperation with a leading special needs teacher in the workshops. During these workshops, which familiarized the participants with archaeology, certain archaeological findings were selected which were in turn modelled in clay, and it could be clearly seen that the two groups involved had different perceptions of the subject matter.

Deaf-blind tactile senses can master to perfection morphology and the utility of items, and some of the clay copies were made with fascinating precision. It goes without saying that the heritage value was completely understandable to the deaf-blind. On the other hand, people with learning difficulties encountered many problems when modelling objects, although they understood their purpose. Additionally, certain works were dissimilar to the originals, and the historical and chronological characteristics of the objects were not perceived by the participants. Both groups, almost by chance, participated in the workshop, and based on the interactions, interest and levels of engagement they displayed, it was concluded that these still marginalized groups gained a lot from the workshops, which contributed greatly to the quality of their lives. It became apparent that the Museum was a place where they felt accepted and welcome regardless of their differences and that a great deal of effort had been made to integrate them into society. The one-off exhibition that resulted from these workshops was such a source of pride and satisfaction that it proved to everybody involved they should continue. In turn, this was followed by numerous pedagogical-art workshops for the members of the *Association for the Promotion of Inclusion* (including the making of carnival masks, Christmas tree ornaments, Easter symbols etc).

The result of all of this was more than surprising, not only for the Museum's experts, but also for the care providers involved. Visits to the Museum,





immediate communication, hitherto unimaginable independence within the Museum resulted from a warm and adaptive approach. What followed were invitations to birthday parties, Christmas celebrations and hugging at meetings.

After these initial experiences, it was found that for a group of partially sighted, blind and deaf-blind people organizing workshops was simply not enough, and that they needed to immediately access information because they were people eager for knowledge and new experiences.

One of the subsequent tasks was a commitment to the specialized printing of a guide to the Museum's permanent collection.

The idea was warmly received and supported by various organizations and state and city institutions that are responsible for approving funding for such programmes. Partial funding was obtained from *Zagrebačka banka d. d.*, who during the European Year for Raising Social Responsibility implemented the '*Zajedno*' ('*Together*') programme which included the printing of such a guide fully suited for this purpose. The strongest supporters of the implementation of the guide were '*Hrvatski savez slijepih*' ('*the Croatian Association of the Blind*'), '*Udruga slijepih Zagreb*' ('*the Zagreb Blind Association*'), '*Udruga za školovanje pasa vodiča*' ('*the Croatian Guide Dog Association*'), '*Hrvatska udruga gluhoslijepih osoba 'Dodir*' ('*the Croatian Deaf-Blind Association "Touch"*') and '*Kazalište slijepih i slabovidnih 'Novi život*' ('*The Croatian Theatre of the Blind and Visually Impaired "New Life"*'). The guide was published in 2005 in both Braille and large print, and con-

tains photographs that are printed in relief. It is designed so that the blind and the visually impaired can freely gain independent access to the Museum, and can walk from the entrance of the Museum, through the Permanent Collection and onto the exit, using the guide to avoid obstacles and to be aware of changes in direction or any items that can be felt.

The cooperation in the production of the guide resulted in a new museum activities and events every year to commemorate International White Cane Safety Day, during which participants with public figures and media promotions try to raise public awareness of the problems faced by the visually impaired, the blind and the deaf-blind. A Campaign titled *'Budimo isti - zamjenimo uloge'* (*'Let's be the Same - Let's Change the Roles'*) saw blind people being led by famous public figures who were blindfolded. This was followed by the exhibition *'Tko gleda, a tko vidi'* (*'Who Looks, Who Sees'*) in which replicas of Museum objects were displayed with Braille and large print legends.

The *'Sklad'* (*'Harmony'*) Workshops were realized to commemorate the (2010) International Museums Day. Members of the *'Dodir'* Association and local primary school children collaborated as part of a themed workshop entitled *'Museums for Social Harmony'*. Early reticence aside, excellent communications were established between children, adults, blind and deaf-blind people. Also that year, the *'Dodir'* Association were the main holder of the *European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR)* Programme for Croatia, producing a piece entitled *U ponoru diskriminacije: program emocionalnog, kulturološkog i socijalnog osnaživanja žena sa senzoričkim oštećenjima* (*'In the Abyss of Discrimination: a Programme of Emotional Cultural and Social Empowerment of Women with Sensory Impairments'*).





Besides co operations with these organizations, the Museum has also developed a multi-year collaboration with 'Centar za kulturu i informacije Maksimir' ('City Centre for Culture Maksimir') on the Project 'Maske' ('Masks'). The aim of this Project is to show the importance of the preservation of heritage as well as maintaining traditions surrounding the celebration of carnival in Zagreb. The project also included a number of primary school pupils, students and schools that cater for children with visual impairments and / or hearing problems or children with learning difficulties.

The Museum has collaborated and continues to collaborate with care homes for the elderly and infirm. These programmes organize visits to the Museum with guides that show people round the permanent and temporary exhibitions, and are also involved in the associated thematic exhibitions. In this way workshops relating to the exhibitions *The Power of Flower* and *With a Hat on the Head* were organized, and were eagerly participated in by both the elderly and the infirm as well as school children. The cooperation also included institutions of higher education, especially the Faculty of Teacher Education in Zagreb. They organized an exhibition entitled *I bez riječi Zagreb* ('Zagreb without Words'). The Exhibition includes student visual art depicting Zagreb in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. The Exhibition and the associated workshops entitled *'Pitam se, pitam, može li i drugačije?'* ('I Wonder? I Wonder? Can it be Different?') were the product of a cooperation with 'B.a.B.e.' a Womens' Rights Association. The theme presented the role of women in society by demonstrating their discriminative treatment at the hands of the media and





the portrayal of women in textbooks. Among the activities carried out by the Pedagogical-Adult Education Department of the Zagreb City Museum, one worth mentioning is the exhibition created by primary school pupils organized to commemorate the European Year of Languages. This was realized in cooperation with the National Committee for the *European Year of Languages* which is under the auspices of the Croatian Ministry of Education and Sport. Another workshop resulted in an Exhibition entitled '*Povežimo gradove*' ('*Let's Connect the Cities*'), which was produced by secondary school students from Zagreb and Austria as part of the project entitled *Moj kvart u novom stoljeću* ('*My Neighbourhood in the New Century*'). The Exhibition encompassed heritage and mutual connections. This was presented in the works created by primary school pupils in several Croatian Cities, which were showcased at the Exhibition '*Born in Europe*'.

These art works from primary schools from across Croatia answer questions such as: 'what does Europe mean to young people?' 'are they conscious of belonging to a European civilization and its shared history?' and so on. As part of its public activities, the Museum organized exhibitions and workshops at the *International Puppet Theatre Festival* (PIF) in cooperation with the *International Centre for Cultural Services in Zagreb*. During the last few years, a project entitled *Fotografija i mladi* ('*Photography and the Young*') was initiated with the aim of encouraging the young to investigate their own City and record as many scenes as possible for posterity. The best works were exhibited and awarded prizes.

From 2008, on the first Tuesday of every month, the Museum opens its doors to the disabled in a scheme entitled '*Dan otvorenih vrata za invalidne osobe*' ('*Disabled Open Door Day*'). As standard a professional guide and a sign language interpreter are available.

In this way a whole range of activities, workshops, publications and exhibitions were produced, the main goal of which was to familiarize certain target groups with themes of heritage and to raise public awareness about the issues that people with special needs encounter. As part of this ongoing activity a guide book for blind and visually impaired people was published in English in 2010. A Croatian audio guide was produced in 2007. From 2011 we have been cooperating with *Udruga za promicanje kvalitetnog obrazovanja mladih s invaliditetom 'Zamisli'* ('*the Association for the Promotion of High Quality Education for Young Disabled People 'Imagine*').

This cooperation included international student exchanges entitled '*Meet the neighbours*'. The Museum's task is to familiarize students with the history of Zagreb through permanent and temporary exhibitions.

All this has resulted in the Zagreb City Museum becoming an institution which provides equal treatment of disabled and non-disabled visitors alike, which significantly contributes to the democratization of society.

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## RÉSUMÉ

La mondialisation a conduit à la démocratisation du savoir, c'est pourquoi les musées doivent saisir le moment et tirer parti de leur rôle unique de porteurs de témoignages originaux. Les nouvelles technologies, malgré tout leur potentiel, ne peuvent remplacer le charme et le caractère unique des œuvres originales qui portent des informations sur leur époque de création ou sur les gens qui les ont inventées et utilisées. Le média qui peut transmettre cette information peut varier et dépendre de plusieurs facteurs, mais le but principal doit être de répandre le savoir en le mettant à la portée d'un plus grand nombre de catégories sociales en les intégrant pleinement à la vie communautaire.

Guidé par ces principes, le département en charge de la formation des adultes du musée de Zagreb, a commencé, il y a une quinzaine d'années, à s'étendre à des institutions prônant une plus grande diversité, notamment en faveur des personnes âgées ou invalides, ainsi que des handicapés. L'ensemble des activités du musée étaient organisées pour toucher le plus grand nombre de visiteurs potentiels en dépit de leurs différences, ce qui est en quelque sorte la mission du musée : créer un lieu qui est important pour Zagreb et l'ensemble de ses habitants, et qu'ils peuvent explorer chacun à leur manière.

Cela a conduit à divers ateliers, publications, et expositions, qui avaient pour but de familiariser les groupes sociaux visés au concept de patrimoine, mais aussi de sensibiliser le public aux problèmes des handicapés et des autres personnes vulnérables ou en marge de la société.

## RESUMEN

La globalización ha dado como resultado la democratización del conocimiento, que es por lo que los museos deben aprovecharse sin vacilar del momento y hacer uso de su posición única como administradores de los testimonios originales del pasado en su propio provecho. Las nuevas tecnologías, con todo su potencial, no pueden sustituir al encanto y las características de los objetos originales que contienen información acerca de la época en que se fabricaron o las personas que los construyeron y utilizaron. Los medios mediante los cuales puede transmitirse esta información pueden variar y depender de varios factores, aunque el objetivo global debe ser el de difundir el conocimiento de modo que haga los museos accesibles a un espectro más amplio de grupos sociales que les integre plenamente en la vida colectiva.



Hace unos quince años, el Departamento de Educación Pedagógica de Adultos del Museo de la ciudad de Zagreb, orientado por estos principios, empezó a ampliar su enfoque desde las instituciones educativas convencionales para incluir instituciones implicadas en la diversificación de la sociedad civil, instituciones para las personas mayores y enfermos e instituciones que atendían a los discapacitados. Se organizaron todas las actividades del Museo para incluir y agrupar la gama mas amplia posible de visitantes potenciales a pesar de sus diferencias y, de muchos modos, esta es la misión del Museo : crear un lugar que sea importante para Zagreb y todos sus habitantes, en el que puedan explorar sus diferentes intereses.

Esto dio como resultado diferentes talleres, publicaciones y exposiciones que no solo iban dirigidas a familiarizar estos grupos objetivo con el concepto de patrimonio, si no que también elevaron el interés público por los problemas a que debían hacer frente los discapacitados y otros grupos sociales marginales y vulnerables.