

STORIES OF MUSEUM OBJECTS

By

Zvezdana Antoš, M.S.
Senior Curator
Ethnographic Museum, Zagreb, Croatia
<http://www.etnografski-muzej.hr>
e-mail: zantos@etnografski-muzej.hr

Paper presented for the conference "Can Oral History Make Objects Speak?", Nafplion, Greece. October 18-21, 2005.

Nafplion, Greece. October 18-21, 2005.

Contemporary museological science arrived already several decades ago at the conclusion that "objects cannot talk for themselves». Instead, we take them as the starting point for interpretation. One of the important questions to ask ourselves in this matter is: «What story do I want to tell to the audience? How will I make the objects alive? How will I do this in a museum exhibition?». During my work at two exhibition projects at the Ethnographic Museum in Zagreb, I tried to find answers to these questions. The exhibitions concerned are: *Furniture in Croatia*¹ (1998) and *Tamburitza – A Symbol of National Identity?*²(2005).

Since the contemporary museological presentation also requires methodological changes in the way of exhibiting the objects themselves, field research was used as the basis for presentation in both projects. In the exhibition projects I used multimedia technology to transform the museum medium itself. In the second project, *Tamburitza – A Symbol of National Identity?*, I wanted to indicate the problem, to initiate the question of identity and encourage the visitors to reflect about it. I wanted to make the visitors feel true emotions and interest for the subject matter even after they leave the exhibition. Finally, I will also deal with the creation of visual and audio documentation, which belongs to

tangible collective memory. Based on the above examples from museum practice, I will also attempt to explain how we can present oral traditions, how to integrate them into the museum exhibition and how to document them.

Besides the most common methods of ethnological research (interviews and observation) and recording (audio, photo and video records), during field work we occasionally also purchase items we want to display at a certain exhibition. When acquiring new contemporary items, we primarily take care that the items «have a story», because we can use the contemporary methods of museological interpretation to tell the stories of individual items by placing them into various contexts of their social life. In this way I used multimedia technology to contextualize the exhibited items (the chair and the *tamburitza*) with their actual social environment.



1. *The chair*



2. *The tamburitza*

During field research, we acquired items for the museum collection (a chair from the late 19th century and one from the late 20th century) and made the ethnographic film *The Story of the Chair*, where we showed the relationship of man, as the creator and user, towards an object. It deals with the symbolic use of the chair, which is an integral part of the local tradition, i.e. a custom passed on from generation to generation. Precisely through oral traditions we learned about the marital custom where this chair was an obligatory part of the bride's dowry, and it was intended for the bridegroom. Only the master of the house was allowed to sit on it. Over time, only widows were left in the village and the picture has changed, so that now they and their occasional guests sit on such chairs. The film also

shows the last self-taught craftsman who makes these chairs in the traditional way using modern tools. But thanks to oral traditions, we learned about all details from the selection of wood to all possible forms of the final product, and finally to the fact that this knowledge is characteristic only for this particular local community!



3. This photo shows how we presented this story at the museum exhibition

The second example deals with the instrument *tamburitza*. Placed in different contexts, it assumes many meanings in its physical, material form, but as a musical instrument it also contains numerous intangible meanings: the sound and the traditional music performed on it, as well as the required workmanship to produce it. Music is a part of oral tradition

performed by hearing and memorization; it is in harmony with the mentality and lifestyle of the people who create it, perform it, learn and memorize it, and pass it on through oral tradition. The skill of producing an individual item, as well as the way in which it is used, is a part of intangible heritage, and since such knowledge is passed on by memory, it is also a part of oral tradition.

At the exhibition *Tamburitza – A Symbol of National Identity?*, which was a guest exhibition at the Festival of European Ethnographic Museums at the Slovenian Ethnographic Museum in Ljubljana in 2005, only one item was exhibited – the *tamburitza* in relation to its life environment. The life environment was evoked by means of exhibited documents, drawings, photographs as well as film and sound.



4. *How did we show this at the exhibition? Besides the video film “Tamburitza from Kuterevo”, there are three CDs containing examples of music from certain periods, i.e. the sound of the tamburitza solo or accompanied by an orchestra, as well as in popular contemporary interpretation.*

Thus, almost every museum item which was acquired during field research can tell a story about its origins and the social and cultural environment it lived in before it became a part of the museum holdings (it tells about when it was produced, of what material it was made, who produced it, what was its purpose, how it was used, who was its owner). Then it can also tell a story of its life as a museum object, but also about its national value as the expression of regional and local identities, scientific interpretations and public polemics and about ways of its contemporary use. Besides the fact that an individual item, placed in various contexts, can show many meanings in its physical, material form if placed in various contexts, it can also contain numerous intangible meanings, such as the skill to produce it, which is passed on from generation to generation by memory. By watching skill to produce the item, we learned through oral tradition about the mentality of the local community and about the way of life in the past and the present time.

The skill to produce such objects is today known only to the craftsmen who were recorded during the research, but the customs related to such items have been completely abandoned since the 1960s under the influence of globalization and now live only in the memory of certain individuals. I believe that it is an important task of a museum exhibition to interpret and preserve the knowledge of a local community. Oral traditions are exposed to the risk of vanishing due to globalization processes, but thanks to contemporary multimedia technologies it is possible to record them, make it available to users and preserve them for future generations.

¹ <http://www.etnografski-muzej.hr/pokucstvo-en.html>

² <http://www.etnografski-muzej.hr/tamburica-en.html> and ethnographic film *Tamburitza from Kuterevo* <http://www.mdc.hr/main.aspx?id=188>