

THE CROATIAN HISTORY MUSEUM - TOWARDS THE FIRST PERMANENT DISPLAY. MISSION STATEMENTS, GOALS AND STRATEGIES¹

Matea Brstilo Rešetar*

Abstract

The Croatian History Museum is led by a professional team and driven by the challenges of a new permanent display within globalization processes. We inherited and preserved an array of national heritage materials that we have researched and interpreted, and in most part published. We are well equipped to keep pace with technological challenges and we are currently working on creating a unified database that would enable a closer cooperation with other museums and a development of joint projects. Mounting a permanent display in this day and age presents us with an extraordinary opportunity to revise museum theory and practice (concepts and framework). The permanent display will display the history of Croatia, however, far from the stereotypes discussed in this conference on „pre-1989 museums“.

Keywords: Croatian History Museum, collections, visitors, educational activities.

¹ Lecture held on the Conference „National History Museums in South-East Europe: Learning History, building shared memories“, Thessaloniki, Greece, 18 October 2010. An International Conference organized by UNESCO, within the framework of „2010 International year for the Rapprochement of Cultures“. Texts used: Jelena Borošak Marijanović, Ela Jurdana, Nataša Mataušić. *Koncepcija stalnog postava Hrvatskoga povijesnog muzeja (The Concept of the Permanent Exhibition of the Croatian History Museum)* Zagreb: Croatian History Museum, 2009; within this text, integral texts by Ankica Pandžić, the head of the Croatian History Museum: „Poslanje Hrvatskoga povijesnog muzeja“ („Mission Statement of the Croatian History Museum“) and „Pregled povijesti muzeja“ („Overview of the Museum's History“). The scientific presentation held at the Convention on national museums entitled „Hrvatski povijesni muzej danas i sutra“ („The Croatian History Museum Today and Tomorrow“), Budapest, December 1999; Ankica Pandžić. „Povijest Muzeja je povijest hrvatskoga naroda“ (The History of the Museum is the History of the Croatian people“), *Hrvatska revija 2* (Croatian Review 2) (2010), Zagreb, April 30, 2010.

* Curator Croatian History Museum.

MUSEUM HISTORY

The Croatian History Museum is the successor to the National Museum, which was founded in 1846 as a result of the rise of national self-awareness during the Croatian national revival and gradual transition from feudal to modern civil society. The National Museum in Zagreb was of great significance in the process of integration of the Croatian people and the birth of a modern nation in contemporary terms. Most of the objects in the Museum's collections bear witness to various political and social changes in Croatia during the 19th and 20th centuries. Since the founding of the National Museum in Zagreb in the mid-19th century, Croatia was part of several states: the Habsburg Monarchy, the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, the Independent State of Croatia and the post-war Socialist Yugoslavia until its independence and sovereignty in 1991.

It is completely understandable that the Museum is expected to finally translate its mission into practice - a task that unfortunately remained unattainable since its founding. The Museum's holdings have been collected, researched, scientifically documented and communicated to the public through various themed exhibitions; however, the Museum never mounted a permanent display. The Museum staff is persistently met with inquiries concerning the lack of a permanent display. Therefore, even though the facts I shall relate may seem anachronous to some, it is necessary to provide the reasons for the lack of a permanent display so that the concept of the new permanent display is more comprehensible and plausible.

In over 150 years of its existence, the Museum never had an adequate space to house its collections, it was constantly relocated and its holdings were in the meantime scattered to other, newly founded cultural institutions. Even though the National Museum was eventually divided into three specialized museums - the Croatian Natural History Museum, the Archaeological Museum in Zagreb and the Croatian History Museum - to this day, none of these institutions found adequate space to house their holdings. Other history museums founded from the mid-19th century on share the same fate (they are situated in inadequate buildings, mostly former mansions of nobility). After World War II, only two buildings specifically intended for museum use were erected in Croatia: the Museum of Croatian Archaeological Monuments in Split and the Archaeological Museum in Zadar.

In 1959, the Croatian History Museum was temporarily relocated to a 1700-square-meter baroque mansion that became its first „real” home. During the period of the Socialist Republic of Croatia, the importance of the Museum was not recognized so it never entered the capital building program.



The baroque mansion of noble families Vojković - Oršić - Kulmer - Rauch, the “first” real home of CHM

However, the democratic changes in the independent Republic of Croatia brought about a change in the status of the national history museum and highlighted its significance. The Law on the Croatian History Museum (May 1991) merged two history museums: the History Museum of Croatia and the Museum of the Revolution of the Peoples of Croatia (founded in 1945 upon the ending of World War II) and determined its status as a state institution. Due to the deliberate devastation of the Croatian cultural heritage during the Homeland War, creating a Program for the protection of the Museum's holdings became a priority.

THE MUSEUM TODAY

Museum computerization has enabled a continuous processing of the Museum's holdings through an integrated information and documentation system “M++”, as well as the implementation of standardization and unification measures. In regard to the latter, it is important to mention the fact that the Croatian History

Museum serves as a parent museum for all history museums and collections in Croatia².

The holdings of the Croatian History Museum include over 200 000 objects (89 579 inventory records)³ within 17 collections (The Collection of Stone Monuments, The Collection of Paintings, Prints and Sculptures, The Collection of Religious Artefacts, The Collection of Objects from Everyday Life, The Collection of Flags and Streamers, The Collection of Military Uniforms and Designations, The Heraldry and Sphragistic Collection, The Collection of Decorations, Plaques, Medals and Badges, The Arms Collection, The Documentary Collection (I and II), The Map Collection, The Archaeological Collection, The Numismatic Collection, The Miscellany Collection, The Collection of Photographs, Films and Negatives and the Fine Art Collection).

Despite the lack of a permanent display and the limited display space of only 250 square meters, the Museum's holdings are continuously scientifically analyzed and interpreted, and the findings of this research published as a result.

The Museum is involved in numerous successful exhibitions and publishing projects and activities. Since the time of gaining independence and sovereignty in 1991, the Croatian History Museum has achieved significant exhibition projects related to themes from Croatian history that could not be achieved before due to the repressive communist regime (especially those from the First and Second World War, and exhibitions about famous people from the Croatian history). Each exhibition aims to explain particular events that led to the creation of Croatian identity and the formation of the Croatian nation, taking into account the fact that the Croatian national identity was formed in interaction with neighbouring peoples⁴.

² Professional activities aimed at promoting the quality of museum practices through establishing a uniform standard and norms (Article 4, Regulations on the Means and Criteria for Joining the System of Museums of the Republic of Croatia). This approach includes supervision, professional assistance and guidelines for promoting the quality of museum activities: <http://www.mdc.hr/hr/muzeji-u-hrvatskoj/sustav-muzeja/o-sustavu-muzeja/> (October 6, 2010).

³ According to the M++ database (October 6, 2010).

⁴ In this sense it is worth to mention some recent exhibitions: Century of changes (2000), Negative / positive – Second World War documented through an eye of photo and video camera (2005), I gave Gold for an Iron – Croatia in the First World War (2006), etc.

THE CROATIAN HISTORY MUSEUM - TOWARDS THE FIRST PERMANENT DISPLAY. MISSION STATEMENTS, GOALS AND STRATEGIES



NEGATIVE / POSITIVE

WW2 documented through an eye of photo and video camera, 2005



LIFE IN THE PALACE, 2006



THE CROATIAN HISTORY MUSEUM - TOWARDS THE FIRST PERMANENT DISPLAY. MISSION STATEMENTS, GOALS AND STRATEGIES





Since the 1960s, the Croatian History Museum has been carrying out extensive educational activities via history-themed exhibitions. More than 80% of museum visitors are elementary, high school and university students, mostly in organized guided tours. In recent years, the number of foreign visitors increased significantly.



Educational activities of CHM

THE NEW BUILDING

The Croatian Government opened a new chapter for the Croatian History Museum in 2007 by sanctioning the acquisition of the former building of the Zagreb Tobacco Factory, a cultural heritage building and a great example of industrial architecture extending to a gross internal floor area of 9782 square meters. Since the Croatian Museum Council approved the Program of the Croatian History Museum in 1998, we immediately embarked upon preparing design documentation for the reconstruction and remodelling of an old factory building to meet expanded requirements of a contemporary museum space. By the end of 2007, a team of experts began developing the concept for the Museum's permanent display - the first ever permanent display of history type in Croatian museum practice.



Former building of the Zagreb Tobacco Factory - a new home of CHM

ON THE CONCEPT OF THE PERMANENT DISPLAY

The authors of the concept of the first Museum's permanent display are the Museum Advisers: Mrs. Jelena Borošak Marijanović, Mrs. Ela Jurdana and Mrs. Nataša Mataušić.

1. The Mission of the Croatian History Museum

With its primary task to preserve and communicate the national historical heritage, the Croatian History Museum collects, keeps, scientifically analyzes and systemizes material testimonies of Croatian history, their information and documentation. Through a vast array of contemporary display methods, the Museum interprets and communicates key messages and concepts from the history of the peoples of Croatia within a wider context of the European social development from the early Middle Ages to contemporary times. Furthermore, by conducting a complex interdisciplinary research of the primary museum materials, the Croatian History Museum gathers information and generates knowledge in order to responsibly articulate and provide a complete contextual presentation of Croatian history.

Through its relocation to a new building - the erstwhile Zagreb Tobacco Factory - , the Museum will finally be able to fulfil its primary task as a national history museum - the education of children, youth and community as a whole. The

Museum will strive to accomplish this task by deepening the visitors' knowledge of the past in order to understand the present and fathom the fact that the Croatian national identity was formed in interaction with neighbouring peoples - through the exchange of cultural, economic and other values of civilization which clearly reflected on Croatian cultural heritage.

The task of the permanent display is to communicate knowledge on the history of the Croatian people and convey a clear and coherent message to all visitors, taking into account different levels of knowledge and understanding. The display is to encompass thirteen centuries of Croatian history so it is necessary to arrange its segments in such a chronological and thematic manner that they are able to act as separate units with intrinsic educational values. A team of experts of different fields (historians, museologist, curators and a vast number of other specialists) work on the concept plan for the display thus creating a truly interdisciplinary enterprise.

The permanent display should analytically and interpretively display and contextualize relevant phenomena from Croatian history and culture from the early Middle Ages to today, with special emphasis on modern history, especially the 19th and 20th centuries. In terms of geography, the display shall present a wider spatial context of Croatian lands (not just the present territory of the Republic of Croatia) where different traditions, cultures and national ideologies once met, clashed and intertwined. Our starting point is the fact that different people in South Eastern Europe underwent integration processes at different times, in a different intensity and somewhat later than in Western Europe, eventually forming nations.

The 19th and 20th centuries are crucial for a national history museum since they witnessed numerous integration processes and the creation of the Croatian national identity (the question of language will be dealt with in detail since language is of crucial value in the process of national integration).

As previously mentioned, the Museum stems from the National Museum founded in 1846 and the Museum's collections inevitably contain numerous objects from that period shedding light on the political, economic and cultural past of Croatian people (individual objects, collections and heirlooms belonging to prominent families, individuals, societies).

Conceptually, we are primarily interested in events related to national integration processes, the interaction with neighbouring peoples and countries, as well as political ideas and programs leading to the creation of the sovereign and independent Republic of Croatia. A special emphasis is placed on the Croatian national revival and on the national integration processes following this period.

Upon its mounting, the permanent display will have become a reference point for numerous questions regarding Croatian history. The goal is to encourage visitors to contemplate the history of their own people and serve as active agents in the construction of general knowledge.

2. Goals

- Provide greater insight into the history of Croatian people,
- Encourage visitors' critical thinking,
- Encourage visitors' independent thinking,
- Promote positive views on democracy,
- Contribute to Croatian integration to the European community,
- Caution about the dangers of simplifying history,
- Warn that politicization turns history into a tool for propaganda,
- Warn how heightened emotions lead to conforming history to the needs of daily politics,
- Explain particular events that led to the creation of Croatian identity and the formation of Croatian nation.

3. Strategies

- Selection of themes and objects

A national history museum typically portrays a history of a country and its peoples using various materials. A historical exhibition, therefore, is comprised of different themes created around selected objects.

The selection of themes will be made along the lines of interpretive history; that is, based on the objects of great historical significance.

The selection of objects will be made to include objects that best reflect a certain theme while taking into consideration primarily their originality and documentary value rather than their artistic qualities.

Precise contextualization of objects will be determined in the phase of developing a scenario for the permanent display (a holistic approach).

The concept strives to present Croatian history in a scientific yet popular manner. Albeit, it must emphasize that the display may not always be “all-encompassing” or “omniscient”, however, it *can* and *should* encourage visitors’ intellectual engagement and contemplation.

- Presentation characteristics

The exposition will employ a narrative concept and a linear chronological and thematic approach with a complex structure (main themes, sub-themes and key terms) followed, complemented and reinforced through a modular display of family heirloom and parts of particular collections.⁵

We determined the focal points for communicating important messages - „anchor points“ - so it is of great importance that the objects conveying these

⁵ It is possible to create an anti-narrative concept - a “petit histoire” - through temporary exhibitions that complement and further develop the themes of the permanent display. See in: *Exhibition Experiments!* edited by Sharon Macdonald and Paul Basu: Blackwell Pub., 2007.

messages be submitted to a thorough critical analysis in order to avoid their misuse and visitor manipulation.

- **Systematization of materials and methods of presentation**

Our guideline for systematization and display organization is facilitating the understanding of a centuries-old history through thematic and chronological units that contextualize historical events from the Middle Ages on. The selection and presentation of materials will be conducted in a way to ensure quality and functionality of the display.

The didactic museographic supplies will vary from traditional to up-to-date multimedia materials in accordance with new technical possibilities.

CONCLUSION

In the end, I must reiterate the fact that the Croatian History Museum never mounted a permanent display since its founding in 1846; and, 164 years later, the curators of the Museum are presented with an opportunity to develop and realize a comprehensive museum presentation of Croatian history.

The Croatian History Museum is led by a professional team and driven by the challenges of a new permanent display within globalization processes. We inherited and preserved an array of national heritage materials that we have researched and interpreted, and in most part published. We are well equipped to keep pace with technological challenges and we are currently working on creating a unified database that would enable a closer cooperation with other museums and a development of joint projects. Mounting a permanent display in this day and age presents us with an extraordinary opportunity to revise museum theory and practice (concepts and framework). The permanent display will display the history of Croatia, however, far from the stereotypes discussed in this conference on „pre-1989 museums“.

We keep in touch with developments in museum community and follow projects of great importance as well as permanent displays of European museums especially those in Central Europe since our holdings are closely related in type and provenance. In this way, we are constantly re-evaluating ourselves, our methods and approaches, and learning to avoid the mistakes of others. Exhibitions in history museums are often „drowned“ in a sea of random historical data and too many displayed objects, resulting in a dreary exhibition with no visitors. There are many good examples that we believe we can emulate in a professional, technological and artistic sense.

