

FOLK MUSEUMS AND THEIR COMMUNITY. HOW TO MOBILISE LOCAL RESOURCES – AN EXAMPLE FROM THE AUSTRIAN ALPS¹

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What is a museum community?

With regard to museums persons can be categorised into three groups:

- the visitors as clients,
- the staff, comprising all kind of tasks: the director as well as the scientific and administrative employees, the guards and also the cleaning team,
- finally as third category all persons who are not yet visitors and who represent potential clients.

The “community” of a museum can be defined as the two first-mentioned categories; an overlapping “design” between visitor and staff is not foreseen.

In the following contribution an example from a museum in the Austrian Alps will serve as an example how an active (“participatory”) museum community can be created by merging these two categories.

Museums and the “free market”

Generally speaking, almost all museums suffer from two crucial deficits: lack of financial means and of adequate number of staff. However, state-owned museums² (still) have the privilege of financial governmental support and are able to hire adequately educated and trained staff. It goes without saying that this kind of “paradise” can only

be enjoyed as long as the relatively new phenomena “privatisation” of cultural institutions does not take place, where the museums have to follow the rules of the “free market system”. The museums can spend only that amount of money which they can obtain on the “free market”; the amount in question reflects the “market value” of a cultural institution. A museum without public significance and recognition will not be able to mobilise funds for its activities; its “raison d’être” will be questioned. Whereas for state-owned museums the free market is a relatively new experience (or still an unknown issue), for individuals and associations (NGOs) who run their own museum, this economic system is substantial for their daily museum-management.

Therefore private museums – and in this context I wish to refer especially to museums of local significance – have to generate their own financial resources.

Challenges for local museums

Small museums of local character, hereafter called “folk museums”, are faced with multiple challenges. Such museums, which operate mainly on local level and whose importance is limited to a village or a valley, are affected not only by a

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²In this context, the meaning of “state-owned” museums not only refers to museums of the central state, but also covers museums owned by other territorial public entities, such as provinces, counties and municipalities.

very restricted budget, but also by a series of other deficits, resulting from their location in periphery areas:

- Small size of the museum community

With regard to (potential) visitors, the size of their "community" is limited: the number of local residents is small, the amount of visitors "from outside" depends considerable on the touristic character of the location. With regard to the staffing situation, lack of funds do not allow recruiting adequately qualified and trained staff which goes in hand with the fact that in remote areas the resource of human capital with appropriate qualifications to manage a museum is limited.

- Missing "appetisers"

Local museums suffer from a frequent problem, which is caused partly by insufficient financial means, partly by lack of intellectual and operational capacities. Once opened, the museum will not change its exhibited collection, the presentation remains unchanged. However, visitors are not going to see an exhibition twice. Consequently, after the local population had seen "its" museum, the museum falls "asleep" due to no other activities ("appetisers") offered. The vicious circle arising from this situation is well known: fewer visitors will result in less income, in less awareness about the institution as well as in less recognition by the public. As a result, lack of attractions and a missing "USP"

(*unique selling proposition*) will lead to low interest for public financial assistance and of private donors in supporting the museum. Moreover, museums without presence in the public opinion and without media coverage soon will loose their reputation of performing an important and generally recognised activity. Under these circumstances, it will be very difficult for museums to be (or to remain) included in the funding scheme of public financial sources and to maintain contacts as well as flow of information with state institutions and political bodies and with the "scientific community", too.

Why to establish a "participative museum community"?

The solution to enhance public awareness and achieve a better recognition is simple, but as already outlined, not so easy to realise: the creation of new attractions ("appetisers") requires intellectual and logistic capacities as well as financial means. Therefore, why not to involve the visitors and citizens interested in local history in preparing and implementing the programme of the museum?

How to create a museum community – an example from the Austrian Alps

The Montafoner Museen

The following *best practise* example is taken from a group of local museums in the valley of Montafon, Province of Vorarlberg, in the western part of Austria. The NGO "Society for the Preservation of the Cultural Heritage in the valley

of Montafon" (*Heimatschutzverein Montafon*) owns and operates four museums (*Montafoner Museen*). The history of the museums goes back to 1906 when the NGO was founded. Since the opening of the first (and biggest) museum in the main village of the valley, in Schruns, in 1921, during the last fifteen years three more museums were created (Brugger, 2008, Strasser 2008).

The museum in Schruns (which serves as headquarter of the administration and houses the library, the archive of the valley [*Montafon Archiv*] as well as the storage facilities) offers – as the biggest of the three museums – with its displayed collections and furnished mansion an overall insight into the life of former generations in the valley and shows temporary exhibitions, too.

Another museum is located in the inner part of the valley, in Gaschurn. Following a discussion concerning the possible demolition of a building with historic significance, the municipality proposed to install a museum – a project which was implemented by the NGO. As the Government of Vorarlberg contributed its financial support only under the condition

that a museum covering a special topic will be created, one decided to devote the museum to a theme, which plays a crucial role for the economic and social development of the region, but which was never subject of a presentation in a museum-context: In 1992 the "Museum for the History of Tourism" could be opened – at that time it was the first museum of this kind in Austria. In June 2009 parts of the – overloaded – presentation were replaced. Until then, due to lack of space, no temporary exhibitions could be shown.

The third museum was created in 1996 in Silbertal and is devoted to the ancient (medieval) mining-activities in the region. In the last years some temporary exhibitions – thanks to the intensive engagement of interested citizens – could be organised (see beneath the description with regard to temporary exhibitions).

The youngest museum was opened on 7 June 2009 in the small village Bartholomäberg above Schruns. The museum is still "under construction". Currently an exhibition about alpine panorama drawings and paintings made from that panorama point of view is shown. The future concept of the



Folk Museum Schruns



Museum for the History of Tourism,
Gaschurn

museum is subject of an ongoing discussion and has to take into consideration the overall museum-concept of the Montafon, which is also in the drafting stage.

In total, these museums welcomed in 2008 some 18.000 visitors (the same as the number of permanent habitants in the Montafon) – however, including events like evening-lectures, concerts and excursions. The NGO (“Society for the Preservation of the Cultural Heritage in the valley of Montafon” – *Heimatschutzverein Montafon*) has some 700 members. As the Assembly of the Municipalities of the valley (*Stand Montafon*) bought in 2009 the neighbouring building to the museum in Schruns in order to expand the exhibition, a new, overall museum-concept, covering all four museums, is in preparation.

These four museums, different in their specialisation and size, have – as every museum does – in common their need to attract their (potential) visitors. While the museum in Schruns keeps its annual number of visitors, both museums in Gaschurn and Silbertal suffer from a decline of publicity, as the permanent exhibitions could not attract visitors anymore. Small temporary exhibitions, which were organised in the last years, helped to stabilise the rather low number of entries in both “satellite” museums.

What can a “participative museum community” do?

With regard to the staffing situation, only one full-time and one part-time position has been created

for all museums – the director and the secretary – which are – kind as a “gift” – paid by the *Stand Montafon*. The rest of the team (curators, house technician, welcome desk officers, maintenance) is covered by part-time- or fee-contracts. Specialists – e.g. to prepare a temporary exhibition or to do in-depth-studies – are hired on project-basis.

Therefore, lack of money and subsequently not sufficient staff, led the director, Andreas Rudigier, together with the board of the NGO to the decision to focus the efforts in creating a “participative museum community”.

In order to achieve this goal, for a couple of years several approaches are being undertaken, which – generally speaking – proved to be successful:

1. Awareness-raising through events in and outside of the museums
2. Tasking private collectors with organising exhibitions
3. Mobilisation of owners and bearers of local costumes to meet in round-tables
4. Safeguarding of traditional and oral knowledge through the “witness of the past-project”
5. To address people who do not enter a museum, theme trails on several subjects outside of the museums “in the field” were prepared
6. As a future project, the new museum will serve as a base for local research – visitors and habitants can make enquiries about local themes

1. Awareness-raising

In order to raise awareness among the local population about the museum and to increase the notion of preserving the cultural heritage, the living traditions and the typical alpine cultural landscape (which are the USP – *unique selling proposition* – for tourism during the summer-season), a high number of events (excursions, evening-lectures, demonstrations of old handicrafts) were organised, which enjoyed high interest and demand. In 2008 some 18.000 visitors could be welcomed – a high number as the population in the valley of Montafon counts also some 18.000 persons. Generally speaking, it can be said that tourists are rather the “classical” visitors of a museum, whereas the other event are frequented by the local population. Among the visitors were also asylum-seekers sheltered in Schruns, who were invited to organise an evening in the museum in Schruns where they could present their own music and paintings (Winkler 2008: 109-110). As the local population lost its awe to “enter” the museums, some interested persons offered their voluntary help. Others started to undertake research in local history or in genealogy and in family research and discovered the museum as their source of help and information. As the museum in Schruns houses also the *Montafon Archive*, the museum plays its role as “information desk” for local research themes. These engaged and interested people represent the beginning of the “participatory museum community”.

2. Temporary exhibitions

Once there was foundation laid for a “participatory museum community”, which showed its qualification for active involvement, the directorate could go one step ahead: Why not tasking the community with the preparation of an exhibition? Among the community were some passionate collectors. In discussions with them one identified two themes which offer sufficient information available as well as appropriate items for an exhibition and which seem to attract the visitors: old photos and traditional costumes. For temporary exhibitions the two “satellite museums” in Gaschurn (on history of tourism) and in Silbertal (about medieval mining) were identified which offered possibilities to house small, temporary exhibitions:

- Both museums were in urgent need of “appetizers”, as their permanent exhibitions remained unchanged since their openings and lost meanwhile their attractiveness. A considerably decline of visitors during the last years in these two museums had to be noted; moreover they suffered from a kind of “dusty” image. New temporary exhibitions brought them back into the notion of (potential) visitors.

- The museums were small in size; their permanent exhibitions took most of the available space. Therefore, temporary exhibitions had to be small. As the new exhibitions were prepared by untrained persons in considerable short time, the displayed items had to be small in number. Bigger

temporary exhibitions, which require more time of preparation, more space as well as a higher level of display-technology, can be hosted in the specifically equipped rooms in the central museum in Schruns. Therefore, the small museums offer good opportunities to display small exhibitions which do not require sophisticated technology.

- Moreover, as the contributors and (first-time) curators came from these villages and displayed photos as well as items found and collected in their neighbourhood, a higher interest from the residents from the respective villages could be expected. These "local ownership" contributed finally to the notion of the habitants as "their" museum which they had ignored for decades. As a result, more people became interested in making research and offered their support for future activities.

Exhibitions showing historic photos were identified as the most appropriate way to involve a new generation of local curators and

to "wake-up" the two "sleeping" museums. In all cases, this strategy proved to be successful: local visitors entered for the first time "their" museum in order to discover themselves or their late relatives on the displayed photos. Moreover, once in the museum, the visitors soon became an important source of information, as they



Bernhard Erhart: boys from Silbertal as Holy, Three Kings, around 1930;



Chorus of the parish church of Silbertal, around 1930

were able to contribute additional information such as names of not yet identified persons on the photos and historical facts which were not known yet to the curators. The information gathered was archived by the curators and deposited in the *Montafon Archive*.

The retired teacher of the village of Silbertal, Hans Netzer, a passionate collector of old photos, started his activity as a curator about an amateur photographer, Bernhard Erhart, who served from the 1930ies until the 1950ies as "village photographer" (Strasser 2003: 21-26). In later exhibitions Mr. Netzer displayed photos of the village in former times (Jenny, Netzer 2005: 20-24 and Jenny, Netzer 2006: 26-29) as well as historic photos of mountain farming houses (Jenny, Netzer 2008: 156). In both cases the local community showed great interest in the old photos: As a result, the discussions between the visitors and the curator stimulated not only an intense discourse about local history but also contributed a lot to a better understanding of the way of life of former generations. The sister of Mr. Netzer owns a rich collection of historic photos of (especially) women wearing traditional costumes in daily life and on festive occasions. In 2008 she designed an exhibition by displaying both old illustrations and original costumes. The exhibition presented not only items of merely aesthetic character but also brought them into context with local traditions and social structure in a mountainous environment and provided an insight in the

social status of the owners of traditional costumes in an alpine culture. The exhibition and its side-events (like evening-lectures and discussions) showed impressively traditional costumes can not be considered only under the aspect of a "beautiful, colourful dress", but local traditional costumes contain also a political message and are subject of social distinction (Tschofen 1991: 324-356): The local residents were asked to present their traditional costumes and to explain the way of the (mostly home-made) production techniques as well as the specific use of the wear during the year. The involvement of the "bearer of the tradition" led to some remarkable results: As involvement in the exhibition and displaying a costume became a matter of prestige, an intensive and engaged discussion on the "correct" (and "exclusive") way of use of the costumes and their accessories emerged. Finally, even the "central authorities" in the field of culture preservation and folklore in Bregenz (*Vorarlberger Landestrachtenverband* – "Traditional Costume Association of the Province of Vorarlberg") became aware of the activities in a rather



Exhibition on Traditional Costumes,
Silbertal 2008

remote, peripheral area and sent an “observer” to the traditional costume-related events!

3. Round table on traditional costumes

(*Montafoner Trachtengespräche*)

The *Montafoner Museen* dealt with traditional costumes not only during the exhibition in 2008³. Without having exact figures, it can be stated that the use of traditional wear in Montafon declined in the last years. The reasons are not analysed yet⁴. Moreover, the museum staff noted – due to quite similar questions which were brought to the attention of the museum – that there is a deficit on information concerning the use of traditional wear. As the museum-staff did not feel competent enough to answer the questions and to provide “concluding”, “final” answers, one encouraged – under the logistic umbrella of the museum and within its series of events – mostly women to meet and to discuss in an open-ended discussion-group relevant questions. The *Montafoner Trachtengespräche* (“Montafon Traditional Costume Talks”) became soon a regular round-table event (Bischnau, Pfeifer 2009: 119-121; Juen, Lorenzin 2007:72 and Walch 2009: 119-121). The engaged discussions focused on the present status and recognition of the traditional wear, their adaptation and use in daily life nowadays. The participants were mainly interested women, who did not only wear the traditional costumes on festive occasions, but also produced them. Their questions

focused on the “correct” forms, shapes and colours and on the ways of preserving the old items. As source of information they referred mainly to oral traditions within their families and to old photos. However, this approach did not take into consideration the specific problems arising from the use of this kind of sources (like questioning the circumstances which led to the specific photo, assessing the information transmitted from generation to generation within the family). As a result, the different views resulted in firmly expressed opinions among the participants which led to the splitting of the group into two “movements”! The museum considers itself as an observer of a process and discourse as it does not understand itself as an institution which decides on the “correct” and “authentic” version of a certain piece of wear and accessories. Although the museum does not know yet which direction the discourse on traditional costumes will take, we can state that thanks to the initiative of the museum and an engaged involvement of the museum community persons with common interests found



Montafon Traditional Costume Talks
(Silbertal 2008)

³Already in 1952 the museum organised an exhibition on *The traditional costume of Montafon in old paintings*.

⁴The decline in attending religious services – where traditional wear was preferable used – could be among the reasons.

means and ways to exchange their views. On the other hand, the museum, which owns a rich – old – collection of traditional wear, has the opportunity to learn about the methods to preserve these sensitive objects representing the cultural heritage of the valley. Moreover, it becomes witness of a discourse on a subject with ethnologic relevance.

4. “Witness of the past project” (*Zeitzzeugengespräche*)

How can a museum mobilise people, who normally remain outside of a museum, so that they become interested in cultural and museums affairs? Here, the aim is not to include them into “the participative museums community”, but to count on them as future clients. One method, which proved to be quite successful, is to approach them outside of the museum. Events, which at the first glance are not related to a museum at all, are a suitable occasion to meet these people and to remain in contact with them. One of the “outside events” is the “witness of the past project”.

During the last years the museum launched several research-projects and tasked experts to undertake studies. During these projects huge orally-based information from witnesses was collected. The museum considered this enormous resource of information and experience as a unique source for future research themes. Following this positive result, the method of oral history became a priority task on the agenda of

the museum. Representatives of the “participatory museum community” (volunteers with special training to undertake interviews) invited elder persons as “witnesses of the past”. During these evenings which focused on a certain theme (like smuggle from/to Switzerland, early winter sport, daily life during the National-socialist era), the witness could talk — about their life, experiences and observations. The audience was invited to put forward questions. The themes were often elaborated in connection with the preparation of a temporary exhibition or on



Witnesses of the Past (Bartholomäberg 2009)

the occasion of on-going research-projects. The talks were recorded and brought into written form. The decentralised approach (the talks took place in villages of the witnesses) of the evenings outside of the museums offered the opportunity to mobilise visitors who normally were reluctant to enter a museum.

Another initiative, however neither initiated nor organised by the museum itself, was the *Geschichtswerkstatt Silbertal* (Working Group on History in Silbertal),



Guided tour on the folk-tale trail
(Vandans 2008)

which was headed by a member of the “participatory museum community”. The reason of the *Geschichtswerkstatt* lies in the still difficult approach to the era of National Socialism. In the remote and small village of Silbertal a resident was member of the SS of Nazi-Germany. As guard in the Concentration-Camp Sobibor in Poland he performed a high rate of brutality and was involved in killing – mostly Jewish – people. However, his name appeared later on the memorial of the dead war veterans of the village, as the community at that time did not know his real activity. In 2007, after some discussion, how to deal with this dark aspect of the past and as high pressure from the media was exerted on the small village, a working group (*Geschichtswerkstatt*) was established in order to clear the role of the municipality and to set a clear sign for dignity and human rights. As a result, one decided to replace the memorial with a new one which pays tribute to the victims of the war and of the Nazi-era (Winkler 2008: 110-112 and Winkler 2009: 97-102).

5. Theme trails

The museum decided to set another initiative to win “outside-of-the-museum”-persons: Interesting objects will not be displayed in the museum, but remain *in situ* in their original setting. The museum will not only provide the description of the objects, but also link these object through a walking trail. Of course, the *Montafoner Museen* are not the inventors of the theme trail, however, they applied it with considerable success. In Montafon, a valley with a high number of tourists (however, mainly during the winter season) theme trails enjoy high popularity not only among residents, but also among tourists. Therefore, both, tourists as well as residents can be addressed as future clients. Moreover, as the local tourism authorities agree on the creation of theme trails, financial support from them can be expected. Also, the setting-up of theme trails is eligible for funding through EU-Funds (LEADER).

Meanwhile, a series of trails enjoy high popularity: Trails devoted to the use of water resources, folktales, historic agricultural use of the landscape (three-level farming system), geology, archaeological excavations and about the city centre of the village of Gaschurn were prepared. Theme trails consist of signposts and information boards “in the field”, sometimes also supported by small leaflets (Ebster 2007 and Rudigier 2003) and by a GPS-driven audio-guide: through these guides, which can be rent at tourist-offices, one can easily receive information relevant to the

present geographical position. The theme trails do not only inform about features of the cultural landscape, but also enhance the notion about the existence of the museums and stimulate tourists as well as residents to visit them. The popularity of the theme trails encouraged the directorate of the museum to consider elaborating more trails in future.

6. Museum as a base for local - and family research

The recent opening of a new – still almost “empty” – museum in the small village of Bartholomäberg offers the opportunity to provide more and new services to the museum community. This village enjoys the privilege of having a “house chronicle” – a collection of data on the old residence building (mostly farming houses). The information was compiled by an amateur-researcher, the late Josef Zurkirchen, who spent his retirement in that village and who could obtain a lot of historic written documents and photos. Moreover, he added records from the official owners’ registry, data on genealogy of the habitants and took photos when he created the file (mostly in the 1970ies). As a result, the history of the small village is documented in an exemplary way. The files are stored now in the *Montafon Archiv*. As the chronicle was compiled some 30 years ago, it is quite unknown to the present population of the village. However, there is always some demand for information on local themes from interested habitants.

Therefore, why not to “return” the archive to the residents? Of course, this is not a plea to empty the well organised and air-conditioned *Montafon Archive*. The original files have to remain in that safe place; however, modern scanning- and reproduction-technology allows creating high-quality copies of documents and photos. The newly-opened museum could serve once as workshop (to produce the copies), as an archive (to store the copies) and as information-provider for the interested population. As the staff in the museum comes from the village itself, it will be easy for them to help and to guide the search-procedure. Moreover, they can encourage the interested residents to provide information; who in turn can immediately follow where and how their donated documents will be stored and made available not only for the community, but also for future generations. Additionally, a regular presence in the media by providing information on “their” – peoples’ – local history will create and enhance the feeling of ownership for the past of the village.

Conclusion

The making and maintaining of a museum community or even of a “participatory” one, requires permanent efforts, which can never come to an end. With regard to the *Montafoner Museen* it can be said that the above-mentioned efforts resulted in an astonishing change concerning the awareness about the museums in the valley of Montafon and led to the creation

of a large museum community. Furthermore, the activities proved that they can exert a positive impact on the mobilisation of cultural heritage resources: Residents lost their awe to work with a cultural institution and showed increased interest in local- and family history. Tourists – even when they do not intend to enter a museum – will learn about the work and activities

of the museums and will be encouraged to pay a visit to one of the exhibitions.

Moreover, both residents as well as tourists become aware of the remarkable high value of the cultural heritage of the valley.

The copyright of all photos is with the Montafoner Museen

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